CONSTRUCTING ELYSIUM AND PLAYING UGLY: METHODS OF INTIMACY IN FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING GAME COMMUNITIES

Genesis Marie Downey

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2015

Committee:
Radhika Gajjala, Advisor
Lesa L. Lockford
Graduate Faculty Representative
Kristine Blair
Sandra Faulkner
ABSTRACT

Radhika Gajjala, Advisor

Using Johan Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle as a context for understanding how sacred spaces reserved for play manifest within role-playing game (RPG) environments both digital and table-top, this dissertation argues that while certain elements of the magic circle are still present, the vast amount of work produced to monitor the boundaries of sacred game space stem from the intimate relationships between players. Online RPG environments are open to critique due to the seemingly wide-spread use of hostility as a gate-keeping tactic. Numerous studies and digital media scholars have examined how bullying, harassment, and bodily threats present within toxic digital gaming cultures act as a means of limiting access to participation. Because marginalized players, whether due to gender, race, or sexual identity, are often playing in gaming environments that get coded as toxic, this dissertation chooses to interrogate the ways in which some players negotiate game environments that are complicated at best and overtly hostile at worst. While the dissertation is careful to note the distinctions between online RPGs and offline table-top RPGs, the core argument made stems from the consistencies present between both: both the online and table-top groups who participated in the study use tools of intimacy both actively and passively as a means of fostering individual as well as group identity. In so doing, the use of intimacy acts as a buffer against hostile acts that would otherwise inhibit participation.

But this dissertation does not just attempt to understand how players weather and negotiate hostility outside of their gaming groups. It also seeks to understand how some players are able to
absorb the hostility and redirect it as a creative play-style. In this case, “playing ugly” becomes a means of performance not directed outward, but rather, inward. Taboo play, in this case, becomes a cathartic way in which players process hostility by becoming hostile. While this play-style may seem to mirror the online toxic environments that can further separate marginalized players from a larger online gaming ecology, playing ugly strives to make its members immune to the aggression—although whether that achievement is attainable is tenuous.
This project is dedicated to all of those people who have our backs, who cheer us on, who drive us crazy, and love us always. It’s all for you, Mom.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank members of my committee for their encouragement and their trust in the creation of this dissertation. Dr. Sandra Faulkner—thank you for showing me how not to be afraid of playing with form. Dr. Kris Blair—your work on the digital helped inform my own understanding of these complicated environments. Dr. Lesa Lockford—you called me out.

You’ve all challenged my assumptions and made me a better researcher. And Dr. Radhika Gajjala? When I applied to Bowling Green’s ACS program, I mentioned you specifically in my statement of purpose. You were the person I wanted to work with. You were the one that I gravitated towards even before I had a clue what I was doing. I just knew you would be a part of it. Thank you for listening and cutting through the chaff. Thank you for your advocacy and your angle of vision.

And thank you to the rest of the Jafarian Apostates, the Lindsey Lohans kept me sane and you all kept me humble. Nicki, I feel like you are my partner in crime. I don’t know if this whole dissertation thing would have gotten written without your feedback, suggestions, and encouragement to keep the ugly stuff. Brock, it’s officially time start a new quest and co-DM now that this present campaign is over. And Debbie? Did you even know I was using your awesomeness as a motivator for my own stuff? Everything you accomplished drove me, pushed me to up my game. I chased your brilliance. Thank you for setting the bar so high. Tiffany, you have meant so much to me. From that very first night class to now, this second, you have been there. I hope my love sustains you through your own academic journey as much as yours sustained me. To Meredith, Alex, and Paul—thank you for the coverage and your understanding and your love. Meredith, you were the one that got me into this project in the first place.

Watching you play, mentoring you, listening to you do your own thing…I am proud of our
gaming life. I am proud of us. Alex—you are next. Mwahahahaha. And to Mikie, Kelly, and Dad…thank you for putting up with my crippling and literal lack of direction. Your love keeps me from getting lost in my backyard. I blame Mom. May her What?! live on. Her voice will always be in my head and heart. Passing that down is the least I could do. A gushing thanks goes out to Net and to all of my students this past year. Thank you for your patience. Hopefully bearing witness to my own writing and researching struggles helped you all realize that road is worth traveling. And to Jenny in the library? THANK YOU! I would be knee deep in overdue book fees if it wasn’t for your diligent anticipation of my scattershot research requests. And the same goes for Beka—you have got mad skills at heading off disasters. Thank you so very much. And to all of those players who agreed to be interviewed, thank you. I asked you a whole bunch of weird questions and you all went with it.

And on a last note, a special thanks is in order to all of my fellow guildies in Daughters of the Horde. You ladies rock hard for so many reasons. Our guild is home and I am so damned proud to be a member of such a kick-ass group of women. We’re writers, and students, and professors, and moms (to skin and fur babies, oh God so many many fur babies!), and daughters, and sisters. And for The Deliverers—I have learned so much about love and friendship through my contact with you all. You have my love and I will cherish our time together no matter what. And to all the rest of those role-players who shared their stories, who made me cry and laugh…I really hope I got the stories right.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION, DEFANGING THE TOXIC</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2006</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2014</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Contexts of the Toxic</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 21st Century Magic Circle</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifications and Definitions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parameters of Playing Ugly</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Necessity for Narrative</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Necessity for Autoethnography and Friendship</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Cyberfeminism</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show Don’t Tell</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Breakdown</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE. THOSE GENERALLY AREN’T THE PEOPLE YOU WANT:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTIMACY THROUGH BOUNDARIES</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment Strategies</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion/Exclusion</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vetting</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideocultures and Governance</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ANCILLARY MEDIA AND TEXTUAL REINFORCEMENTS ........................................................................... 47
WHO NEEDS GROUP IDENTITY? ........................................................................................................... 53
ACCESS THROUGH BOUNDARY FORMATIONS ...................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER TWO. IT’S A WEIRD LOYALTY THING: INTIMACY THROUGH TRUST ………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………… 57

SAFETY ................................................................................................................................................. 51
“MALE ROLE-PLAYERS NORM” ............................................................................................................. 66
ANONYMITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ....................................................................................................... 70
DISINHIBITION EFFECT ........................................................................................................................... 71
SELF REPLICATING BUBBLES .................................................................................................................. 73
COMFORT ................................................................................................................................................ 75
IMMERSION ............................................................................................................................................. 77
THE SHARED DREAM ............................................................................................................................... 78
TIME SINKS ............................................................................................................................................. 83
SERIOUS AND TOO SERIOUS GAMERS ............................................................................................... 84
BLEED/PLAY ......................................................................................................................................... 87

CHAPTER THREE. IF WE’RE ACTUALLY PLAYING TOGETHER-TOGETHER: INTIMACY THROUGH PRESENCE ................................................................................................................................. 91
TECHNOLOGY: VOIPs AND IMMEDIACY .................................................................................................. 93
TECHNOLOGY: VOIPs AND TERRITORIALITY ......................................................................................... 98
TECHNOLOGY: VOIPs AND VERIFIABILITY ............................................................................................. 100
TECHNOLOGY: VOIPs AND AGENCY ....................................................................................................... 101
TECHNOLOGY: VOIPs AND TOGETHER-TOGETHER ............................................................................. 103
CHAPTER FOUR. I’LL GO TO BAT FOR MY GUILDIES ANY DAY!: INTIMACY THROUGH SOCIALITY

Learning to Fail ................................................................. 124
Mitigation of Vulnerability .............................................. 127
Networking, Race, and Invisibility ................................. 132
Broken Builds and Prefab Failure ................................. 138
Chance ................................................................. 140
Alone Together .......................................................... 142
Mentoring ................................................................. 145
Anchors and Advocates .............................................. 151

CHAPTER FIVE. FRAGILE PYTHONs: FALLOUT AND PLAYING UGLY

On Sign Posts and Manuals ........................................... 153
6:00 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s House, Northwest Ohio, U.S. .... 154
11:00 p.m. Stitche’s Garrison, Frostfire Ridge, Draenor, WoW 154
6:30 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s House ................................ 155
11:01 p.m. WoW ......................................................... 156
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendship as Method</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chimera</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research Lenses</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Thoughts, Final Considerations</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. CONSENT LETTER</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B. CONSENT LETTER</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C. QUESTIONNAIRE</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“If You Wanted a Heal” Meme</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Page 1 of <em>D&amp;D</em> Newsletter</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Page 3 of <em>D&amp;D</em> Newsletter</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Image of a Proudmoore Guild’s In-game Funeral</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Michael Nitsche’s Model of the 5 Conceptual Planes of Game Space</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION. DEFANGING THE TOXIC

Summer 2006

[Guild] [Fade] whispers: He wanted me to send him a naked picture of myself so I sent him a picture of my dog’s vulva. He shut up after that.

You remember Fade’s comment, that summer you attempted hardcore raiding in World of Warcraft (WoW). She sounded Québécois over Ventrilo.¹ You never asked. She’s the one that put this idea in your head. Way before the dissertation. Way before you thought about tools of intimacy.

Summer 2014

[Guild] [Nin]: I was explaining our guild and someone called it a gimmick guild²

[Guild] [Kio]: LOL!

[Guild] [Nin]: I just about frothed at the mouth

[Guild] [Imr]: o.o what does THAT mean?

[Guild] [Nin]: dude. We’ve been around since the game damn well started.

[Guild] [Gul]: it means their jealous.

[Guild] [Nin]: gimmicks come and go


²Guilds are commonly found in massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like WoW. Depending on those goals, whether emphasizing sociality or end game content, guilds help players achieve success through cooperation and teamwork. They are persistent teams of players ranging from tens to hundreds of fellow players identifying with the specific goals of the guild.
Another guild in WoW, another faction. This one is Daughters of the Horde. All women this time. There was gender verification. You’ve stuck around longer in this one than any of the others. Not just because of the dissertation. You think you fit here.

**Fall 2014**

Sensory images. Voices. You have written everything down like a good autoethnographer, but the words are disconnected and sporadic. You all sit around the table in their living room. There are gummy bears, Girl Scout Cookies, Monster Rehabs and dirty martinis. There are ten-sided dice on the table, the only tool needed in Vampire besides note-taking materials. Their sweet-but-dumb 105 pound pit-bull/mastiff puppy is in his cage because they can’t train him to not jump on the table and eat the dice. Listen: David Loggins’s “Please Come to Boston” plays in the background. Hans, the storyteller, the Game Master, is a guy you have known since you were an undergraduate in college. You met in a creative writing course and your teacher hated him. She ripped apart his sexist stories. You were vocal in supporting them. They were funny and clever and you saw them as subversive, rather than sexist. She loved you, nurtured you, though. She was your mentor. But damn, did she hate him. That was twenty years ago. Now, his arms

---


4 *Daughters of the Horde (DotH)* is a Horde faction guild in *WoW*. Their sister guild on the Alliance side is *Daughters of the Alliance (DotA)*. Since so many members are in both, *DotH*, unless specified, is the name this dissertation uses to refer to both of these all-female guilds.


6 Game Master (GM) is a table-top RPG storyteller similar to the *Dungeons & Dragons* Dungeon Master (DM). In this dissertation, I use DM/GM to refer to a storyteller who plays both *D&D* and *Vampire* (or other table-top RPGs).
and legs are covered in tattoos. He shaves his head to hide the receding hairline. He could pass for a young Bruce Willis or old Brad Pitt if he would just stop smoking. Henry Miller, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner are his idols. He gave your daughter his Cadillac. He has offered to adopt her if the opportunity ever arose. He is that close of a friend.

Connie: “You disgust me.” Not sure if she is in character or not.

Hans: “Gary, Indiana is a wasteland. 79,000 people. In 1960 there were 180,000. It’s a dying place. Public library closed. Minimum wage jobs. Urban decay. The Jackson 5 came from here. In 1960, 65% white. Now, 86% black.” Hans looked these facts up. He takes it seriously.

He’s setting the stage for the campaign. This is the world our vampires will inhabit. It’s the first campaign where race is center-stage. No other campaign has emphasized it like this before. It makes you deeply uncomfortable. Can you role-play it right? Should you? Can you treat it as a teachable moment since you know how ugly Hans and Franz are bound to make it? Franz insists on naming his character Toby. You know how this will go.

Connie chooses the Jewish girl from Miller Beach. Patty plays the 25 year old white community college teacher. Two black characters from Midtown (Hell Hole)—you and Ula pick them. They are brother and sister. Two black characters from downtown West (2nd Hell Hole)—your daughter picks the teen mother and Franz picks her brother.

This is the list of characters you get to choose from. You name yours Audre, as homage. You make a list of everything you know about your character. You create her from bits and pieces and you envision a black feminist vampire superhero. Hans stressed this—only as vampires can we save our city. There is subtext unvoiced, though. As humans of color, we can’t.

Notes written down: Audre is quiet, unassuming, reads voraciously. Spends time working in the cafeteria at the community college (the drummer got her the job). I started taking intro
courses at the college. Doesn’t go to church. Hates hats. The more she reads, the more she becomes disinterested in religion. She sees the people who do go, and they don’t ever get better or change. It just helps them deal with what they have instead of becoming successful. Freaky tall with very short hair. My mother is a nurse, my father a janitor. You make a point to stress that they are working poor and not on welfare. I disapprove of my brother’s band although I design their flyers. The rest of the players are in that band.

_You flip between first and second and third person. Distance shifts depending on what you think you know. Note: are you idealizing her because you want to prove something to Hans and Franz? Or is this what you think needs to happen for real social injustices to get fixed? Your daughter is a teenager and you are allowing her to participate in this role-playing group. We could leave. Or we could talk about it later. Or we could laugh even if we are not sure why. Maybe this campaign is the way you think systemic racism happens in the real world—the assumptions, the appropriations. The privilege. We play ugly sometimes. And you don’t always know your own motivations or desires to do this._

The origin story. Our moment of creation. The rest of the characters are practicing in The Palace, a now abandoned theater. It’s crumbling around us. _Hans shows us a picture of it on his laptop. He tells us The Jackson 5 really did play here once, before entropy won._ I sit off stage and do homework while they practice. Something shifts in the air. The music morphs. Turns into something else. Something magical and intoxicating and too full of desire and longing. _Obviously vampires. They are using Presence on us, although your characters don’t know it. It’s a Toreador discipline. Of course a Toreador would be here. They are attracted to the sublime._

---

The band’s music called them. I look up from my books and notice the crumbling hall is now occupied by others. Multiple and terrifying. The set ends and the strangers, they explode with applause and whistles. So so many bodies I do not recognize. All slick and predatory and some achingly beautiful. They approach us. Introduce themselves.

You look through your notes and Hans never clarified race with them. He describes their clothes, their attitudes, but you assume they are all white since it’s the default, usually.

A representative from each clan, a Toreador, a Ventrue, a Brujah, a Malkavian, a Gangrel, and the rest of the pack goes unidentified. Each clan asks each character if we will accompany them. One by one, their characters choose a hand and walk off. I stay. I do not know these strangers, their presence unsettles me. I am left alone with the rest of the unknown others. They wait until all of my friends are gone and then one smiles back at me, showing teeth as deadly as a viper’s. “You’re the meal,” and they converge.

And just like that, my life ends and something ugly begins.

***

Cultural Contexts of the Toxic

Gender is often analyzed in games from two primary vantage points: from without and from within. One position, as exemplified by the work of Anita Sarkeesian, focuses on looking at these games as primarily visual media. The worlds that exist in these games (usually within the context of videogames, but could also be applied to offline table-top games, as well) can be systematically dissected into static components that happen to a player. The other vantage point, as Adrienne Shaw emphasizes, privileges the role of player subjectivity and the ways in which players not only react to the visual medium but also shape their experiences based upon their

---

own understandings of the role they play. Instead of emphasizing a static visual text, the player’s agency becomes a crucial analytic component.

In the popular website *Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture,* Anita Sarkeesian critiques gamer culture as well as game design in an effort to draw attention to the problematic narratives embedded within video games. By focusing on “deconstructing the stereotypes and tropes associated with women in popular culture as well as highlighting issues surrounding the targeted harassment of women in online and gaming spaces,” Sarkeesian argues that this harassment isn’t just a product of individual gamer behavior—it’s embedded into the construction of the game itself and if positive changes are to occur in the ways that women are treated in and out of these games, attention must be drawn to these problems. Mia Consalvo has suggested that feminist game studies scholars need to focus more on not only documenting the harassment that takes place, but to also analyze the ways in which “toxic gamer culture” is a product of not only game designers, but the “alpha players,” and player networks, as well. Nina Huntemann acknowledges Consalvo’s call for more discourse in part by emphasizing how the backlash against Sarkeesian produced its own pushback against that toxicity. Because Sarkeesian’s Kickstarter campaign for “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” was able to generate six times its original monetary goal—in large part due to the public outcry of the

---


bullying that she received as a result of the series, Huntemann stresses that this public response is exactly why feminist discourses are so important when analyzing game culture.12

Adrienne Shaw also emphasizes the ways in which marginalization takes place within game studies, but her emphasis focuses more on pinning down the reasons why the very definition of gamer identity is so problematic. Shaw argues that self-identifying as a gamer is far more complex than just assuming that it is a person who plays games. By focusing on the ways that consumption, time commitment, and “performing subcultural capital” influence this self-identification process, Shaw argues that these identities are tied to the ways in which the perceived gamer audience is not only represented within these games, but also in the ways that the audience sees itself. In other words, the interpellation that takes place in the construction of a gamer identity is tied to who gets to be defined as that gamer, which in turn influences how those in-game representations manifest (or don’t). Shaw argues, then, that instead of just focusing on the expanding in-game representations to include marginalized groups, feminist game scholars must also look at the people who play games along those margins and who do not see themselves as gamers (precisely because the hailing of “gamer” has not included their play styles in the definition) because “their play practices and representation in all types of games is important regardless of whether they are gamers or not.”13

I started with the three brief gaming moments and contexts because they highlight specific examples of the ways in which Sarkeesian’s, Consalvo’s, Huntemann’s, and Shaw’s points


manifest as a precursor to this present project. Because Shaw emphasizes recognized legitimacy as a requirement for proper gamer identity, denial of legitimacy acts as a barrier to inclusive gaming practices. The discussion of a guild getting labeled as a gimmick due to all-female membership (rather than a legitimate guild containing male players) highlights how definitions (and who does the defining) can be a site of tension. The sexual harassment that takes place in gaming environments is exemplified in the raid guild quote and could be seen as an example of the toxic gamer culture that Consalvo and Sarkeesian analyze. Even the third example of playing ugly in table-top gaming highlights a key connection to player subjectivity and toxicity. Much like the toxic gamer culture that Sarkeesian, Huntemann, and Consalvo describe, each of these snapshots contains a level of toxicity for the members within the contexts of gaming environments, whether through a guild chat conversation, a private chat in raid, or a weekly Vampire campaign. These brief snapshots also illuminate the various ways that pushback manifests. Whether directly or indirectly, gamers do negotiate these complicated gaming environments and they do so in a variety of creative and effective ways.

But there is another element of these three gaming moments that speaks to Consalvo, Huntemann, and Shaw and highlights a major tenet of this research project: in spite of these perceived hostile gaming environments, players did not quit the game. Instead, they negotiated within the contexts of those gaming environments and managed to do so in a manner that still allowed for pleasure. Instead of disappearing, players turned to their player networks, and social media sites. They turned to in-game mediators and out of game allies. They turned towards and away from technologies that promoted or interfered with their play experiences. They turned inward and outward. They honed their skills and accepted their own play-styles as important. They were alpha and omega players, leaders and followers, mentors and students, and in all
cases—no matter what context and no matter how marginalized they felt, they did not quit these games.

But how is this possible? This dissertation starts with this very question and indeed addresses a variety of related research questions. How do some gamers negotiate gaming environments that might be hostile to their presence? Why do these players continue to play instead of quitting? Is toxic gamer culture negotiable and if so, how? Is there a problem with the very term toxic gamer culture? Are we being counterproductive somehow in just naming it and not articulating the strategies by which many gamers form and inhabit communities in and out of game? When does the term toxic gamer culture cease to hold power or relevance for that player? How do gamers who don’t see themselves as marginalized negotiate gaming environments that frequently do get labeled as hostile? Is there something about role-playing games specifically that allows for these types of negotiations to take place that may not be as possible in other gaming genres? In what way does the mentoring of a gamer help or hinder the way these negotiations take place? Is the mentoring process itself negotiable?

While not suggesting that this analysis of negotiation is a panacea for toxic gamer culture, this dissertation does hope to illuminate one possible way of understanding how or why those who participate in role-playing games are able to transcend player-induced gaming barriers. Even though these barriers to gaming culture are significant and are present in all genres of game play, some players have figured out a way to use game structures and technologies that are already build into the game system to handle those barriers. In offline gaming environments, toxicity and exclusion are present as well, but negotiations also take place even if they are negotiated differently due to the physical and spatial proximity of players.
It’s the focus on spatial physicality that is, of course, the crux of this difference specifically because of the way that anonymity functions (or doesn’t) in face-to-face interactions. Toxic online gaming environments could be seen as byproducts of what Michael Tresca eluded to in the original iteration of *Penny Arcade’s*14 “John Gabriel’s Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory” (GIFT): Normal Person + Anonymity + Audience = Total Fuckwad.15 Because anonymity and the lack of consequences associated with that anonymity are prime characteristics of toxic gamer culture, GIFT is a useful (albeit informal) method of discussing the harassment and hostility that takes place in gaming environments. This can also be applied to offline role-playing games such as table-top games like *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* and *Vampire*, since face-to-face gaming environments still run the same “Fuckwad” risk even if anonymity functions differently. While this tongue in cheek reference is highly connected to disinhibition effect, GIFT’s offline application is still relevant to the broader discussion concerning the exclusive/inclusive binary associated with toxicity. Even if the face-to-face interaction within table-top RPG’s removes anonymity, the end product of “Total Fuckwad” can still be present (as the brief narrative of the *Vampire* night highlights) due to the performative aspects of role-playing—if it’s a *persona*, then the player is removed from having to take responsibility and in effect becomes invisible, effectively replacing anonymity with invisibility.

14 The creators of *Penny Arcade*, Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins, have had a controversial presence in conversations concerning manifestations of toxic gamer culture in no small part because of Krahulik’s “Dickwolf” series of rape jokes and anti-transgender tweets on Twitter. This dissertation will not be looking at *Penny Arcade’s* involvement directly, although analyses of the ways in which toxic gamer culture manifest in gaming communities could include *Penny Arcade’s* influence, as well as the backlash associated with it. For the purpose of the present discussion, the reference to *Penny Arcade* is limited to just GIFT.

As a way of clarifying exactly how toxic game culture is understood within gaming communities, one aspect that should be addressed is that the term itself is hardly fixed—not because of a myopic denial of the very real problem, but because of the perceived reach and assumption of who is actually creating the toxicity. For example, the following passage emphasizes a core reason why player subjectivity is a crucial aspect of this dissertation.

It’s all over Voice Chat, Chat rooms, Reddit, Message Boards, Forums, MMORPG’s, gaming conventions, high stakes competitions, and casual gaming time. The small number of really destructive haters is without a doubt the loudest out of all of us. You and I have to deal with the stereotype, the looks, and the judgment of everyone because a small percentage of gamers are toxic.

Everyone has bad days, bad games, and even bad moments. But these are the exception, not the rule. We gamers want to play our games in a positive environment that encourages exceptional gameplay. We love our games, our gaming communities, and our culture of puns, jokes, and laughter. Why does the minority get to represent who we are to the rest of the world? \footnote{Irondraconis, “‘It’ is Toxicity,” \textit{GoodGuyGaming3} (blog), accessed April 12, 2014, http://gggaming3.com/it-is-toxicity/ (site discontinued).}

There are a few specific reasons why the above passage illustrates why this dissertation is significant to present discussions in game studies. Player subjectivity is crucial to the understanding of why players continue to enjoy playing in environments that are sometimes hostile to their gaming presence. As the above passage illustrates, the perception of who is and who is not a toxic gamer—much in the same way that Shaw argues concerning the contested definition of who gets to be considered a gamer in general, is contested no matter what space it
seems to occupy. As Helen Thornham clarifies, “gaming is defined, not only, or primarily, by the
game, but by the power dynamics in which, and through which, gaming is experienced.”\(^{17}\) It’s
the ways in which these experiences are embodied that is, therefore, a crucial component when
analyzing the negotiations that take place within RPGs. Because toxicity can be found in the
online worlds of MMORPGs and offline in table-top RPGs, this dissertation chooses to
emphasize both of these spheres all the while acknowledging the fact that there are vast
differences between the two. One major reason why this focus is made possible is because of the
nature of the way Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle functions in RPG’s.

The 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Magic Circle

In the seminal text, \textit{Homo Ludens}, Johan Huizinga invokes the concept of the magic circle
as a kind of third space reserved for play. One that is separated from the physical realm but also
situated outside of a purely imaginative one. It is a space where play happens for its own sake,
with its own rules, its own gravity and its own geography. The magic circle is that space
occupied by the chessboard itself, or Azaroth,\(^{18}\) or a \textit{D&D} grid-map in a DM’s\(^{19}\) living room.
But that sacred space only exists while the game is in session and is only meant to be a
temporary state.\(^{20}\)

\begin{flushright}
18 A primary geography found in \textit{WoW}.
19 The DM writes, teaches, acts, referees, arbitrates and facilitates the game for the other
players. The DM is the storyteller. See Cook, Tweet, and Williams, \textit{Dungeon & Dragons}
20 Johan Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture} (London: Paladin,
\end{flushright}
Huizinga’s magic circle has come under increased scrutiny in the 21st century—particularly since digital technologies have blurred the online/offline divide to such an extent that “[We] find human society on either side of the membrane.”21 This meeting point between the imaginary and the real is heavily scrutinized in game studies, specifically because Huizinga emphasized a kind of purely delineated existence between the world on the chessboard and the world that places the chessboard on the table. But, as game theorists have long known, virtual worlds are created as an amalgamation of the real and the virtual22 and that membrane that marks the circumference of that circle is permeable. The same can be said within the context of a table-top role-playing game. While table-top role-playing could be seen as just another example of Huizinga’s analysis of the ritualistic physical space of the play experience, the social and cultural negotiations that take place between the players and the game (whether through the consumption end or the production end of the game system design process) demands a permeability of that same circle.

But there is a catch. Game designers build these worlds and game theorists often interrogate the ways in which those worlds affect the people who play. But it’s not just where we play online that affects the nature of this circle. It’s not just about how well virtual worlds are constructed as play spaces. That 21st century magic circle should acknowledge the blurring of the circle’s contours, but analysis of that circle must also take into consideration the physical, social, and familial contexts in which gaming both online and offline happens. In other words,

---


contextualized physical space shapes how that still significant magic circle functions and it isn’t merely an issue of the virtual or the real.23

This exploratory study begins with that quote, juxtaposed with guild chat discussion, and a sensory synopsis of a *Vampire* night for two reasons: not only do they illustrate negotiated tensions, they also illustrate negotiated *spaces*. Role-playing games are usually more dependent on constrained physical space.24 The computer screen, television screen, the rooms where these tools are located, the internet connections necessary to connect players to their online environments—digital game space is intimately connected to the placement and existence of each of these mutually constitutive components.25 In table-top role-playing games, physical location is central, so the role of privacy and safety become even more crucial in the way that gaming takes place. And while there are notable exceptions, the essence of a role-playing game is private—the game is designed primarily for the participants. Outside audiences to that game play are far more ancillary to the game play experience and can influence the game in unexpected or unwelcomed ways. Whether that location is a living room or a gaming table in a public cafeteria, those game spaces are used by those who participate in that environment and help shape how that participant interacts with other members as well as the game, itself. This

---

23 This idea of the 21st century version of the magic circle is also discussed in Downey although the primary emphasis is on the ways in which physical locations affect the virtual game play experience. In the context of this dissertation, this physicality is also applied to the table-top role-playing experience. See Genesis Downey, “The Here and There of a Femme Cave,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 3 (2012): 235, Electronic Journal Center.


dissertation, therefore, explores how these role-playing spaces function as a core method of keeping players motivated to keep playing.

Because role-playing games, both online and offline, emphasize narratives, socialization, and team work as significant contributors to overall game enjoyment and identify formation, analysis of how the social ties within role-playing gaming communities impact gamer participation and inclusion is crucial. By analyzing the ways in which gamers experience play and derive meaning and enjoyment, this study highlights how the coping techniques, mentoring processes, and social safety nets that are already in place help players build and maintain resiliency.

This is the context for this exploratory study. Despite harassment, despite weak bonds between players, despite possibly hostile environments, gamers keep playing. This study seeks to understand the stories of those who already self identify as role-playing gamers, but also those who are in the process of that identity formation. By focusing on individual voices and the stories they have to tell about why they play and how they learned and how they participate in these physical and virtual environments, the goal is to answer how some players are able to not only build resiliency in these complex social environments, but also derive pleasure and identity from those experiences.

Clarifications and Definitions

Of course, there are specific assumptions and limitations that must be acknowledged. When referring to online/offline role-playing games, I am specifically referring to MMORPGs and

---

26 As well as those players who do not identify with the term, gamer, at all.

27 R.V. Kelly defines MMORPGs as “living, self-contained, global, three-dimensional virtual worlds, each one the size of a real-world country filled with forests, prairies, oceans…and thousands of simultaneous players.” While this definition was accurate in the early turn of the
table-top role-playing games, rather than games played with console based offline gaming systems such as Xbox and PlayStation. Role-playing games, both online and table-top, are a specific genre of game play. The communities who occupy MMORPGs are numerous and those who play other game genres such as first person shooters are just as numerous. Tom Boellstorff describes the characteristics of virtual worlds (and for the sake of the present project can be applied to both online and table-top) with four defining features: worldness, shared sociality, persistence, and embodiment. These qualities are therefore used in this dissertation as a way of limiting the scope of the project. Worldness, for example, is in reference to the way that environment functions in game. As Boellstorff states, “[t]hey are not just spatial representations but offer an object-rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact.” The social aspects of these games are also “multi-user by nature”—they are meant to be a shared experience that allows for “synchronous communication and interaction.” Persistence is also crucial not only to virtual worlds, but specifically why the need for an online and offline table-top emphasis is necessary to the present project. The worlds in which these games take place do not cease to exist once the player has either logged off or left that D&D living room. Indeed, persistence emphasizes the ways in which these games continue to evolve, and “thus change while any one participant is absent, based on the platform itself or the activities of other


participants.” The last characteristic, embodiment, can best be seen in the way that the avatar functions in these games. Hence, that earlier emphasis on the point of view switching that is common in RPGs can be seen in the way that embodiment functions as a way for the player to engage with the gaming environment. By embodying that avatar, a player is then able to play as that character and thus take on the identity of another while simultaneously maintaining the self.  

This exploratory study focuses on table-top fantasy RPGs as well as on fantasy MMORPGs specifically because of the ways in which both stress not only Boellstorff’s four characteristics, but specifically because of the ways that team building through group membership, the game design emphasis on storytelling, and the participatory fluidity within the group creation process are central to the gaming experience. Fantasy RPGs also dominate the market share of the MMO industry. While other genres of games may contain aspects of Boellstorff’s defining qualities, they do not contain all four. I also work off the assumption that fantasy RPGs do have a tendency to be more inclusive than non-fantasy RPGs—particularly because of the ways in which group cohesion and sociality are built into the game design. While console gaming that involves Xbox and PlayStation and hand held gaming devices like Nintendo 3DS do have a strong fantasy game repertoire (albeit non-persistent game worlds), I focus primarily on fantasy RPGs that have open play that allows for guild formation and group play within a persistent gaming world environment. Because fantasy MMORPGs like WoW and EverQuest (EQ) have a long established use of these kinds of group play, and because the table-top fantasy RPGs such as

30 Ibid.


32 EQ is another fantasy based MMORPG and owned by Sony.
*D&D* and *Vampire* also require group play (and worldness, persistence, and embodiment) as part of its game design, I chose to interview only those participants that play those games (although the people I did interview play other games, as well).

**The Parameters of Playing Ugly**

At this risk of drawing too many false dichotomies between online and offline RPG environments, one key area that is addressed in this dissertation revolves around the concept of playing ugly as a distinctive play-style. Because the term could be seen as a synonym for toxic gaming practice, it's important to clarify exactly how I am using the term as it relates to the table-top RPG group, *The Deliverers*. While the term “playing ugly” is used to describe one gaming group’s play-style, there are unique characteristics present that raise interesting questions concerning the assumptions made about toxic gaming environments in general. *On the surface*, playing ugly uses the same tools to marginalize players—racial epithets, misogyny, sexism, harassment, bodily threats…they are all present. But this play-style happens on a micro-level. It’s reserved for the 5-7 players present and is structured as a form of taboo play meant to render the monstrous toothless. Players use the monstrous as a performative tool—whether it is framed through toxic language or imagined depravity, in order to *safely* understand social injustice. The actual contours of playing ugly are analyzed throughout this dissertation particularly because the various motivations for participating are complicated by friendships and informed through intimacy.

**The Necessity for Narrative**

The story is the crux of how this study produces meaning. The narrative emphasis in fantasy RPGs is a significant characteristic of the genre. The story of a gimmick guild celebrating its ten year anniversary is one such story. A black feminist vampire illuminates another. And another
and another. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves matter. They do shape how we see these worlds, the games, and these people. This is why ethnographic and autoethnographic methodologies are so crucial for this type of study. My gaming history was created in relation to other gaming histories. Other voices. Ethnographic participation, as Boellstorff emphasizes, is “the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a fieldsite as a consequential social actor.” The use of ethnography as a methodological tool must focus on those “complex currents of everyday life that comprise our collective lived experience as human beings.” The emphasis here is on collective lived experience. It emphasizes our stories. Not just the ones we tell ourselves, but the ones that have been sold to us in the past whether through marketing executives, “alpha”-gamers, or DM’s. Too often, people who play games are told who they are—that their gaming identities are valid or not valid depending on how they play and how they consume. This exploratory study interrogates those assumptions by examining our self-identified gaming narratives as a way of analyzing the roles of others in shaping/strengthening/refining those narratives.

Because of this emphasis, the people who participated in the study are made up of a variety of online and offline participants. Online, I interviewed members in a female-only guild named The Daughters of the Horde found on the Bronzebeard server in the MMORPG, World of Warcraft. The majority of their non-gaming online presence takes place through a private

---

33 Ibid., 64.

34 Ibid., 3.

35 In order to accommodate large numbers of players simultaneously accessing the game, MMORPGs frequently separate large numbers of players into different server clusters as a means of management. Bartle explains that these servers (commonly referred to as “shards”) can be thought of as multiple copies of the same virtual world. In this case, the Bronzebeard server is the specific server cluster that allows those players to experience that persistent world. See Richard A. Bartle, Designing Virtual Worlds (Berkeley: New Riders Publishing, 2004), 95.
LiveJournal account and Facebook group. Through snowball sampling, I also interviewed self-identified gamers who play on *Everquest* and *Elder Scrolls Online* (beta). The offline component consisted of interviews with players who play table-top RPGs in general and one specific RPG table-top group which has been playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire* on a weekly basis for over ten years. Because I am a member of both the online and offline groups, participant observation as well as interviewing was a key component. Because of my own involvement within these online and offline RPG groups, the autoethnographic focus, as well as the strong emphasis on self-reflexivity is a crucial component in the study.

**The Necessity for Autoethnography and Friendship**

Autoethnography, as well as ethnographic participant observation, and friendship are appropriate methodologies in this dissertation for a host of reasons, not in the least of which stems from *malleability*. Heewon Chang describes autoethnography as a combination of “stories...reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context”36 but Ellis and Bochner stress the interplays between autobiography and “ethnographic explanation” while acknowledging the ways in which history and language also get contextualized.37 Still others view it as a bridge between “the self and the social.”38 It gets referred to as a kind of literary tale, ethnographic memoir, or as an experiential text.39 But while the actual contours of autoethnography change and morph depending on the specific research


39 Ibid., 47.
site, most authors agree that there is an interrogation that takes place between culture, the self, and others. It is no coincidence that the self, in this case, is positioned between culture and other. The self becomes the conduit.

But there is another element to autoethnography besides the situating of the scholar between research and writing that makes it an appropriate method for a dissertation that interrogates role-playing as a site of negotiation. There is a definite political element present when that scholar chooses to situate herself as an integral part of the research process. As Bochner argues, “when we give up the notion of an unmediated reality, we forgo the scientist’s strong claim that he is discovering something completely outside himself.”\textsuperscript{40} For Ellis, this is one reason why auto “scares people who were educated to treat human subjectivity as a threat to rationality and to believe that differences of opinion could be arbitrated by objective criteria beyond dispute.”\textsuperscript{41} So autoethnography and ethnographic participant observation not only become political with the bridging process between culture and others, they become political by interpellating researchers into rethinking their roles as subjects.

So even though this study relies heavily on narrative techniques concerning my own life experiences as a gaming mother, gaming mentor, and gaming player, that positioning isn’t in a vacuum. Indeed, my own gaming status informs the way I view my daughter’s gaming practices\textsuperscript{42} as well as the other players that I interviewed. To not acknowledge that their stories are imbedded in the way that I view my story is to miss the importance of respect as a guiding

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40} Ellis and Bochner, \textit{Composing Ethnography}, 20.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 21.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{42} Because my daughter is a minor, her involvement is purely through my own gaming mother lens. She never participated in the interview process and is never referred to by name in this dissertation.
\end{flushright}
element when researching others. Since a key element of autoethnography is telling the story as it is—not as you want it to be, the autoethnographer’s own ethical positioning must also take those positions of others into account. Participant observation is a crucial component because the observations taking place are concerned with that dual positioning. As Gajjala and Altman state, “researchers studying the production of identity in cyberspace must engage in the production of culture and subjectivity in the specific context while interacting with others doing the same in order to gain a nuanced understanding of how identities form and are performed in such online spaces.”\(^{43}\) It’s these nuanced performances that require a “going deep” approach that cannot be achieved by treating RPGs as visual-only texts. Because engagement within these online and offline gaming environments rely on player subjectivity, the “physicality of the body is expressed through everyday material practices, even when those practices involve online production of self.”\(^{44}\) Therefore, meaning, in the way that this dissertation argues, must get constructed through doing and autoethnographic methodologies work as effective tools for this kind of production of knowledge.

But it’s not just the positioning, the storytelling, or the ethical treatment of others that is at play here. It’s also because of the nature of role-playing that makes autoethnography necessary. Role-playing—both in MMORPGs and in table-top RPGs always requires a conduit. There is always a relational sense of play at stake—not just for the game designers or DMs, but for the players who experience the game, experience the socialization, and experience the physical spaces in which that play happens. In other words, the role-playing that this dissertation


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 2.
investigates is already using the tools that the autoethnographer is familiar with—the conduit between the personal and the public. By choosing an autoethnographic toolkit, I am acknowledging that I am straddling multiple positions. I am a gaming mother, gaming scholar, gaming player. By choosing autoethnography, I am claiming all of these positions because they inform one another in order to produce meaning that is inside as well as outside of myself—much in the same way RPGs struggle with this exclusive/inclusive dialectic. Much in the same way that the very act of negotiation in role-playing is, in itself, a political positioning.

And above all else, autoethnography and participant-observation are necessary due to the entire focus in this dissertation: the emphasis on the role that intimacy plays in shaping inclusive gaming environments. Studying intimacy requires an intimate subject position. Because trust is such a central component of intimacy, the players I interviewed had to not only trust me, but I had to be able to trust them. A stranger could not have gained access. But a friend could. This is precisely why Lisa M Tillmann-Healy’s friendship as methodological tool was a crucial component. Intimacies are contextual and malleable and, at times, painful. Balancing methods of friendship with methods of research has the potential to illuminate and inform aspects of both. That isn’t to say that an intimate subject position is not rife with its own set of complications, either. Indeed, the autoethnographic reliance on self-reflexivity makes this intimacy that much more dangerous. Schechner stresses, for example, that this is the challenge of performing fieldwork. Since it’s understood that there is no true neutrality in this process, it’s the fieldworker’s duty to become aware as possible of that baggage in relation to other people’s positionings and revise as needed.45 Having to acknowledge my own play-style, my own monsters, my own moral ambiguity was uncomfortable and problematic and did affect these

gaming friendships. I didn’t want to expose myself because I didn’t want to position myself in such an ugly light. But autoethnography requires exposure, requires a self-intimacy, and it requires a striving of a more equal power dynamic between the researcher and the researched. If their stories were scrutinized, then mine must be, as well. Danger was had by all.

On Cyberfeminism

I rely heavily on a cyberfeminist framework throughout the study—specifically because the connections between online and offline game play are so steeped in the ways in which gender and technology inform one another. In *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice*, Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala and Christine Tulley explore the various ways in which technology, virtual practices, and community building are used to address “women’s issues.”46 Since cyberfeminist practices are so varied, using it as a theoretical framework allows for a more open approach to gauging how these virtual and offline spaces *should* operate (as sites of possible empowerment), but also in how they actually *do*. According to Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, since cyberfeminism “necessitates an awareness of how power plays not only in different locations online but also in institutions that shape the layout and experience of cyberspace,”47 using cyberfeminism as a means of gauging how these participatory practices function inside and outside of a toxic gaming environment (whether gamers view it as toxic or not) has the potential to lay bare the ways in which the push and pull of those power structures get negotiated.

---


By focusing so heavily on exclusion, marginalized gamers are in effect divided from the larger gaming ecology. By looking at the ways in which a variety of gamers participate and derive pleasure from RPGs—not just female, and not just gamers who see themselves as marginalized, the cyberfeminist emphasis is less on just the masculinity discourses that take place, but also in the ways in which community building still manages to function.

A cyberfeminist framework also allows a lens through which to view toxicity in a way that might help clarify why those power negotiations get performed in the way that they do. In describing theater, Richard Schechner argues that due to its dangerous nature, constraints must be used in order to make the theater performance safe. “In safe precincts at safe times actions can be carried to extremes, even for fun.”

This is of particular use when thinking about playing ugly and the ways in which role-playing the taboo can be “carried to the extremes, even for fun.” Because role-playing games vary in the degrees in which players have direct or indirect agency, an emphasis on how players perform their roles (whether as character, player, leader, mentor, and/or student) within their communities has the potential to shed light on the ways inclusion manifests and fluctuates.

As stated earlier, my own experiences are embedded in the experiences of these participants. Dwight Conquergood’s understanding of that relationship between myself and these participants directly acknowledges the reciprocity that exists as “an acknowledgement of the interdependence and reciprocal role-playing between knower and known.” When quoting Michael Jackson’s acknowledgement of the vulnerability present in such a relationship, he states “we put ourselves

---


on the line; we run the risk of having our sense of ourselves as different and distanced from the people we study dissolve, and with it all our pretensions…”⁵⁰ This acknowledged movement of the observer and observed is of particular importance when thinking of Conquergood’s understanding of those power dynamics. There is no detachment. It shifts and turns “to the intimate involvement and engagement” of co-performance.⁵¹ This dissertation, therefore, unpacks and interrogates that intimate involvement.

Show Don’t Tell

As Dwight Conquergood emphasizes, ethnography requires embodiment. It’s “an intensely sensuous way of knowing.”⁵² The structure of this study reflects the nature of role-playing. Much like the construction of a story, there are characters, settings, dialogue, sensual detail, tensions, and themes.⁵³ Because each of these participants has a dual existence—they are themselves and, for a time, they are their characters, it was crucial to explore ways of showing this chimeran normalcy as well as highlighting the connections to larger cultural applications. This is one main reason why this dissertation emphasizes footnotes so heavily. Because Huizinga’s magic circle is such an important concept in gaming, and because the boundaries of play are contested spaces, the form of this dissertation plays with the ways in which boundaries actually function. There is movement present when a reader is expected to not only comprehend what is happening here (inside the text), but also that which is there (outside of the text). The ample footnotes—whether an aside, or a citation, or a suggestion, therefore, are designed as a further illustration of how

⁵⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁵¹ Ibid., 93

⁵² Ibid., 83.

⁵³ And in service to self-reflexivity, the unavoidable necessity of a sometimes unreliable narrator is present. As autoethnographers know, our baggage sometimes illuminates ourselves more than others.
permeable and layered these spaces truly are. They cannot make sense on their own, but if the boundaries are *transparent*, their contextual nature can be an effective subversion.

There are other aspects of form and function, as well. Each chapter in this dissertation focuses on a core aspect of intimacy that emerged within the interviews as well as within the participating process. Each chapter begins with an autoethnographic snapshot that highlights aspects of online and offline participant-observation and relates to that core aspect of intimacy present within that chapter. Analyses of the participants’ stories, the cultural implications, as well as a theoretical framing, follow from there.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter one focuses on the role that boundaries play in fostering intimacy. By constructing private gaming environments, players acknowledged the necessity of selectivity in fostering intimate game relations. Because of this, recruitment strategies as well as governance styles are discussed as they relate to both online and table-top players. For both, recruitment was a source of tension—not only for players seeking out new play groups, but also for the members already within the group. Because of these tensions, governance styles were crucial ways in which to gauge new membership, as well as continued membership within a group. The work involved in the maintenance and policing of these constructed boundaries also show these tensions. I also analyze the ways that players enforce and deepen the intimate ties between themselves through the use of ancillary media usage, including private groups in social media sites like Facebook or LiveJournal, as well as private electronic newsletters.

Chapter two analyzes the necessity for trust as a means of promoting intimacy. Because safety was an overriding concern for most participants—usually as a reaction to harassment but also as protection from outside scrutiny, the analysis of how trust functions as a means of
promoting safe game play is of core concern. Accountability, bleed, and the pitfalls of immersion, as well as the necessity of comfort as a means of fostering intimate play experiences are discussed, as well. Of particular note is an analysis of how players frame their understandings of who is actually contributing to the problems associated with toxic gaming practices.

In the third chapter, I discuss the connections between intimacy and presence. While physical spatial environments would seem, on the surface, to be a table-top RPG issue, digital environments are also connected to the spaces in which participants choose to play and can still foster intimate and private play experiences that help connect players. It is for this reason that play spaces are also considered a significant element of maintaining a level of presence that allows for intimacy to continue. The role of the story is a significant aspect of presence, as well. Because storytelling allows for a building of empathy through identification with characters, the stories in RPGs are an important cohesive stitch between members. But it’s not just the cohesion that is a product of the storytelling experience. Cohesion also depends on who gets to tell that story and how participants are able to achieve a level of agency within the game and then transform that agency into a group response. At the heart of this is the ways in which players are able to connect with the characters they create and to what level that creation process enmeshes the player to their group and allows for a level of intimate embodiment.

Chapter four analyzes the way that sociality contributes to intimacy. The mitigation of vulnerability and the ways that mentoring and leadership roles function as a method of mitigation are also discussed. By analyzing the ways in which the mentoring of new and established players actually happens within these groups, it becomes clear that the mentoring process does not just happen to a player—it is reciprocal and depending on the nature of that relationship and the nature of the game experience, all of those other factors of intimacy, story engagement, and
safety come into play. Of particular note, this chapter also addresses issues of race—not only in the ways in which these RPGs create essentialized races through game design, but also in the ways that players discuss (or do not discuss) race as a component of gamer identity. This chapter also explores the more negative experiences that players have playing in game environments without a support network and how these players are able to shift their play styles or play experiences in order to negotiate hostile environments.

Chapter five discusses, through a combination of narrative and analysis, why intimacy is fragile but also resilient. By analyzing how participants in one tight-knit gaming community dealt with a toxic episode that compromised the elements of intimacy present within that community, I show how intimate play environments are not static states—they require active maintenance by all members in order to function effectively. By analyzing the rules of playing ugly, and showing how the violation of those rules relate to toxicity and the structures of intimacy, I argue that it’s the lack of intimate relations that allow toxic gamer culture to exist—when intimacy is present, toxicity does not hold power over the player. Or the group.

In the conclusion, I analyze why these themes and inclusive gaming practices matter. Overall, I acknowledge—not only in the chapter but also in the larger project—that these role-playing games possess qualities that may or may not be present in other online and offline gaming genres. RPGs can be inclusive even if they are not always free from tension. As Mia Consalvo states, we must keep looking at the various ways that marginalized gamers are excluded from participatory practices, but this dissertation posits that we must also look at how inclusion happens, as well. The lived experiences and stories that this exploratory study analyzes highlight an important way of addressing these exclusions. We must acknowledge that inclusive

54 Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture.”
gaming practices do exist and marginalized gamers still play in spite of a hostile gaming presence. Exclusion isn’t going to change unless we acknowledge the methods that work. The final chapter, therefore, focuses on these dialectics and how future research might allow for an even richer synthesis of participatory experience, not only within fantasy RPGs that already have the toolkits available to players, but to the larger gaming ecology, as well.
CHAPTER ONE. THOSE GENERALLY AREN’T THE PEOPLE YOU WANT: INTIMACY THROUGH BOUNDARIES

Hans is pissed. We are sitting in the breezeway—Patty, me, him. While they take their smoke break in between dungeon fights, I sit and listen to the argument. It’s about the new boyfriend again. He’s a student where me and Ula work. They have been dating for two months and Patty wants to bring him over to play in her Vampire campaign that’s starting up in a few weeks.

Students and professors can’t play together. It’s not even open for negotiation. We waited until Patty had graduated before bringing her into the game and she was someone that had been vetted for years beforehand. But it’s not just that student status. Of all majors available at the local community college, there is only one that is problematic: law enforcement. Patty is dating someone who wants to be a police officer and in this group, with these people, and with the conversations that take place is this house….just, no.

He is a stranger, an unknown-and-therefore-possible threat.

So we sit and we listen to Hans scream about police brutality. About his head getting smashed against a cop car once. About Patty’s taste in men. About me and Ula losing our jobs if we role-play with students. And then it’s Patty begging off her first foray into being a Game Master for her Vampire campaign if he can’t be there to share the experience with her. Date nights and game nights overlap too much. And it’s the two of them screaming and it’s the two of them threatening and the night ends early.

I’ll talk to him, Ula tells us as we head to the car. It’s just going to take time.

***

Us versus Them. Inclusion. Exclusion. Binaries. Borders. This isn’t just random word association—each one of these abstract terms relates in some way to the role that boundaries
play in fostering intimacy in gaming environments. Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle is a prime example here—in order for that circle to exist, there must be a boundary of some kind between the outside and the inside. It’s permeable, but it isn’t completely missing. Boundaries give the circle its meaning, its name, and its shape. In this chapter, the necessity for boundary construction and an analysis of how those boundaries connect to intimate play environments is a key focus. The role of privacy, the intricacies of governance, the use of ancillary media to reinforce inclusion (and exclusion)…all are predicated on an ambivalent (and sometimes contradictory) understanding of group identity. Who you are as a player, as a group, and as a friend shifts with each new boundary formation. But intimacy is the pay off.

Privacy

“If you get in with the right people, maybe it can become the best part of the game.”  
“[D&D] is kind of a common language between gamers.”

These three quotes from players highlight a common theme when discussing privacy. Knowing who to play with and how to tell the good from the bad and the right from the wrong requires a clear understanding of which boundaries a player is willing to live with when interacting with other players. Fantasy RPGs complicate this due to the heavy emphasis on group play. While players of both online and table-top acknowledge solo play as an option, grouping with other players is mostly unavoidable. As the quotes also demonstrate, there is also a level

---

55 Alaina, interview by author, April 3, 2014.

56 Jane, interview by author, April 22, 2014.

57 Agnes, interview by author, March 19, 2014.

58 This is particularly true of table-top RPGs since games like D&D and Vampire are designed to have group participation. In MMORPGs like WoW and EQ, solo play is a perfectly
of tension involved in this decision process—getting “in” with a good group isn’t easy and often leads to incompatibility. This is one reason why guild involvement, in the case of online play, is beneficial. Guilds are designed to be the “good group”—players join guilds in order to mitigate incompatibility. In table-top gaming, the face-to-face interaction also produces tension—getting “in” with a good group is just as challenging, if not more so, due to the physical proximity of players.

But getting “in” also involves movement from an x to a y—from a general public anonymity to a far more specific private subjectivity. The first step requires a focus on recruitment.

**Recruitment Strategies**

One key concept when discussing privacy is the way in which exclusion and inclusion function in the recruitment process. Gary Allen Fine’s analysis of role-playing games in the 1980’s stresses that perceived common interests are a key way in deciding who plays fantasy role-playing games. In his early explorations of role-playing games, Fine argues that there is an evolutionary process regarding the ways in which games and gamers are chosen to participate. As he states, “recruitment is predominantly collective, in that participation requires the presence of others. As participation increases, these others are more readily available (e.g., through public gaming clubs) and individuals are recruited.” For numerous players interviewed, this pattern was evident. Those players who adopted their RPGs early (i.e. started playing *WoW* during

acceptable play-style that can still be pleasurable. But as Patty emphasized, it does seem like these games tend to favor group play rather than solo—the best gear (whether item level or appearance), toys, pets, and mounts in-game are only achievable through group play.

---


60 Ibid.
“vanilla”\textsuperscript{61} or \textit{D\&D} since the late 1970’s) discussed the ways in which they first came into contact—innovators adopted the game first and then told their friends who then started playing, as well. Once participation was widespread, those original players could then recruit new players from a wider pool (a pool of strangers, rather than close friends). For those players who started playing after a game had gained a cultural foothold,\textsuperscript{62} they joined groups after watching other friends play. By that point, play was widespread enough so that finding other players wasn’t as difficult, although finding other like-minded players was. Overall, the movement started with private space, moved to a public sphere, then moved back to private space. So in one sense, while Fine stressed this process as an evolution, it’s more accurate to think of the recruitment process as cyclical.

Fine’s work on RPGs was groundbreaking and \textit{Shared Fantasy} is considered an important seminal text regarding RPG subculture research. What’s interesting to note here is that his research took place in the late 1970s—right when \textit{Dungeons and Dragons} was becoming a

\textsuperscript{61} Playing vanilla \textit{WoW} is a reference to playing since the game began—November 13, 2004. It’s also referred to as classic \textit{WoW}. If a player has been playing since vanilla, it means that they have been present for all game expansions including Burning Crusade, Wrath of the Lich King, Cataclysm, Mists of Pandaria, and (the most recent as of November 2014), Warlords of Draenor. Each expansion has brought new abilities, new playable classes, higher game levels, and new complexities in content. Vanilla, in this sense, is the most basic “flavor” of \textit{WoW} but also has social significance—if a player has been playing since vanilla that is a reference to commitment to the game. Guild recruitment requests will frequently reference “playing since vanilla” in order to show their guild’s ability to withstand pressures to collapse. If a guild has survived since vanilla, a player knows that the guild can be trusted to last.

\textsuperscript{62} In the sense that a fantasy RPG had become popular enough to spread beyond its direct audience. Once games like \textit{D\&D} or \textit{WoW} transcended to pop culture status, intertextual references could be found outside of the game. For example, both \textit{D\&D} and \textit{WoW} have had shout outs in the television shows, \textit{The Simpsons}, \textit{Community}, \textit{South Park}, and \textit{The John Stewart Show}. This is also a reciprocal relationship. The \textit{South Park} episode, “Make Love, Not Warcraft,” eventually made its way into the game as a PvP achievement. See Frank Agnone, J.J. Franzen, and Eric Stough, “Make Love, Not Warcraft,” \textit{Machinima.com} (blog) November 15, 2006, \url{www.machinima.com/article.php?article=459}.
popular hobby for (usually) young white males. Katherine Castiello Jones, however does suggest that RPGs have expanded outward so much, that demographics and scope have forever changed the RPG landscape. But Fine’s initial understanding of how recruitment happens does still resonate even if the culture at large has changed. The reason being that common interest and recruitment are tied to gate-keeping.

**Inclusion/Exclusion**

For example, when analyzing how the guild, *Daughters of the Horde*, recruits new players, there are core issues that need to be addressed in regards to exclusion as a result of common interest. *DotH* does not recruit through the battle.net forums connected to *WoW* or in-game chat channels. In *WoW*, it is very common for guilds to do an open invite directly in the game as well as in the game forums. At any moment a player can be “spammed” with a call for a new guild recruiting. But for *DotH*, this open call in game and game forum is not an option because of Blizzard’s Terms of Use (ToU). While the ToU does not specifically state that recruitment for gender specific guilds is a violation of the game, the ToU does stress that harassment is considered a violation and since Blizzard emphasizes that this determination is at the “sole and absolute discretion of Blizzard” and that the code of conduct is framed in such a way as to allow Blizzard to decide what is in the “spirit of the game,” the perception of violation is present.

---


64 Spamming in this case refers to the barrage of unsolicited recruitment advertisements some guilds will use in chat channels in order to reach a large number of players. Spamming, while violating the End Users License Agreement (EULA), is a frequent occurrence. See *WoWWiki*, s.v. “Spam,” last modified June 3, 2015, www.wowwiki.com/Spam.

This perception is a key component to consider especially since there have been times when Blizzard has been criticized for their confusing enforcement policies. For example, in 2006, players recruiting in-game for LGBT-friendly guilds were told by Blizzard moderators that they would have to stop advertising as LGBT—not because the recruiting itself violated the harassment policy, but because the recruitment would possibly incite other players to violate the harassment policy. While Blizzard did eventually allow LGBT-friendly recruiting, the perception that in-game exclusion requirements could be ToU violations is still rampant. But in-game recruitment ToU violations can be avoided simply by not advertising in-game. WoW community sites directly tied to the game through battle.net circumvent the ToU, but Daughters of the Horde do not advertise there, either. Based on the ways in which all-female guild recruitment questions are dealt with on the forums, it becomes clear why DotH does not actively recruit through open forums.

[1] I just wanted to say that female players like yourself who put this much emphasis on sex ruin it for other females in a gaming situation that already views your sex as clannish and unwilling to work together with the other sex. This is the 21st century stop giving a !@#$ about what someone has between their legs and stop being sexist

[2] An all female raid team wouldn't progress very far.

[3] Ladies guild. Sign me up. Is it a problem that i am a dude?


67 Forums directly tied to the game require players to log on as one of their characters. Most players will log on with a main character specifically because of the added reputation boost that goes along with the level of the character. A player logging on with a level one character is not afforded the same level of social capital as a level 100 character since there is a greater sense of anonymity with a level one—anyone can make a level one character. The time and play commitment required for a level 100 character adds to a player’s “street cred.”
I understand women can play just as well as men. But EVERY guild I have been in with more than one girl player has had drama. One girl sets up rank as the Alpha female and any other ones who join just spark drama or are targeted for drama. This has been without exception over my 8+ years of playing this game.

So, it'd be very interesting to see how 10 women got along. Stop trying to be a White Knight. ITT: Girls getting super defensive and can't take a joke.

Neat idea, but 90% of ladies don't mesh well with each other.

Sweet, a bunch of self-righteous feminists. Oh my god look at us we're all ugly fat chicks that are proving our worth in raiding!

This guild would work if they can manage to synchronize periods and not raid on those days.

Sadly when people have to try and go out of the way to prove something all it is for is themselves and the select few. All of the raid teams IRL or raid on have girls in it and none have to prove they can rock out. Maybe its the server or the company you keep but you shouldn't have to prove anything its simple either you are good or you are bad. Gender has no basis on that but good luck in recruiting for a feminist movement on WoW, it just proves that you can be just as sexist as the men you are trying to prove wrong.

fyi..i've created an all male guild to compete with yours.68

---

68 These posts were replies sent to different self-identified female high level players asking if there were female-only guilds on WoW they could join. I’ve kept the comments anonymous, but they are easily accessible through a quick Google search. The original access dates were in February 2012, but I also accessed the updated posts as of March 14, 2015. After reviewing those original posts, I did notice a distinct uptick in positive replies to the original threads. While there are still numerous sexist posts referencing synchronized periods and the supposed drama female gamers bring to guilds, there is also pushback from fellow players, both male and female, calling out these replies as sexist and down voting the comments. These threads were originally accessed at “Any all female Guilds/Raid teams?” February 19-22, 2013, www.us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/7924333946?page=1.
Thomas Brignall III defines tribalism as “the occurrence of groups and subgroups within existing social structures that divide into smaller subgroups or tribes.” These antagonistic responses could be seen as the effects of tribalism since guilds in *WoW* (and other MMORPGs) not only exemplify tribes, but also “amplify, among many players, a discourse of separation, competition, and antagonism against those who are different.” Because an all-female guild is an uncommon occurrence in *WoW*, it’s this difference that is seen as a threat.

As an alternative, online social networks not directly tied to *WoW*, like LiveJournal, can also be used as recruiting tools. One community found on LiveJournal is WoW_Ladies and is a hub for players looking for a safe social space in which to discuss the game. Requests for information concerning female-only guilds are not met in the same way as in open forums of *WoW*.

[A] Hello I've been wanting to start an all girl guild for a while now

I'm currently on the server X, I'm not sure if my server has any yet I think there was one but it died slowly of course because everyone who started to join wasn't a female lol So I want to get one going. I already have a guild. I'm just not sure how to get it going so that I

---


70 Ibid., 120.

71 Although, *DotH* and *DotA* have been in existence for almost ten years and are considered two of the oldest and most stable guilds in the game by its members, there is still a perception that these kinds of gender exclusive guilds “won’t last.” For a further discussion on the factors that affect guild survivability, see Nicolas Ducheneaut, Nicholas Yee, Eric Nickell and Robert J. Moore, “The Life and Death of Online Gaming Communities: A Look at Guilds in World of Warcraft,” (paper presented at the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 28 San Jose, California, April- 3 May 2007).

72 Because WoW_Ladies is an online community with minimal constraints to access, I recorded these exchanges anonymously in order to draw attention to what is said, rather than who says it. The identities of particular members contributing to the conversation, as well as identifying server information, were redacted.
can get the attention of other girls. I'd need a few officers to help out so I can get things rolling. Any help, advice, anyone on the server who might want to help out

-Thank you :)

[B] If you haven’t already, then have a think about how you want to present it. Is it only for female toons, only for those who identify irl as women’s female toons or are all alts welcome. Obviously it’s not going to be a home for men who are dicks about women, but what about women’s differing views on women, are you trying to foster a pink unicorns sort of feel, or hoping to round up a bunch of women who don’t put up with girly simpering and vanity and are going out to kick ass? There’s a big middle ground but too many at one extreme may well later drive out people from both the opposite and from the middle which doesn’t bode well for continuity. Will it be welcoming of males who understand the reason the guild exists and like to play that way, or how are you going to police a no-males admittance policy? --the B

[C] Aside from taking umbrage with this whole comment

WHY DO YOU SIGN YOUR POSTS

[D] Because how else will we KNOW? --the D

[E] Well, I agree with the fact that the [B] certainly phrased things badly, but that individual certainly does have a point. I don't, personally, care if a guild is all female if it happens to focus entirely on end-game, level 90, big -deal, intense stuff. Another woman certainly might not appreciate my own "stop and smell the roses, read all the flavor text, explore that tall thing over there, what IS an armor level number" methodology. A third person may call both of us out for communicating with fellow guild members out of character. There is also the question of toons - my boyfriend doesn't identify online as male, and plays exclusively
female toons. I also play exclusively female toons. Since neither of us use voice type stuff (like I said, I'm an explorer) would the guildmaster care that my boyfriend is a BOYfriend.

All that said, I could see generating an alt and participating in any fun role-playing, world event, weird activity type stuff in an all female guild, much like I would do the same for any other, similar guild.

[C] Aside from "will it be female toons only or women-only", it doesn't read that way to me. It sounds like the options presented are "do you want a girls guild or a COOL GIRLS guild"

[C] I think the Horde/Alliance all-women guilds on Bronzebeard US got a lot of their membership from LJ communities! Once your guild is created, posting here is a good way to get noticed. If you have the stomach for it, you can post on the realm forums on battle.net, or make a twitter account to advertise.

good luck!

[F] Yeah, they do.

Maybe the OP can contact our officers to ask for advice or if they have any questions?

[F] Honestly, Daughters of the Alliance/Horde on Bronzebeard-US promoting was via livejournal but that was back when Livejournal was a lot more popular. But Livejournal isn't as active..and I don't even think clones like Dreamwidth are as active as Livejournal once was. I could be wrong though. We still get new members pretty regularly though via word of mouth and stuff like livejournal! You could always ask officers in either guild for advice or suggestions. But my advice would be maybe try promoting it via tumblr (by just adding #world of warcraft tag maybe?) or even facebook. Both seem extremely active and popular.

[A] Yea I think that's the only problem is recruiting. I'm in a few groups of all Warcraft gamer girls. I'm just unsure how to attract the attention that'll get people to want to join. Of
of course no one is gonna wanna leave a 25 guild for a lower lvl guild. So that's probably my main issue, and while recruiting how to even get the proof the player is a female.\textsuperscript{73}

While the LJ community is far smaller and selective in who participates in the discussions, there are a couple of interesting differences that pertain to issues of exclusion and inclusion and how that relates to privacy. Daughters of the Horde maintains a LJ presence, but recruiting is done primarily through in-game grouping with strangers and/or word of mouth.\textsuperscript{74} A player looking to join a female-only guild might hear about DotH or DotA\textsuperscript{75} through open forums from other players on battle.net, but there is far more retaliation by other players (and very few actual answers to the recruitment question). Through WoW_Ladies, a community specially created for female players as well as “Gentlurkers,”\textsuperscript{76} those same recruitment questions are not met with derision, sexism, or outright hostility, but suggestions and names. Because DotH has had a presence on LJ for about a decade, other community members are familiar with their presence and so the recruitment process is far more passive. Players actively seek out DotH so that DotH doesn’t have to.


\textsuperscript{74}I did have this happen to me in-game during the participation observation portion. I received a whisper from a random player that I had been grouping with asking about becoming a member of DotH based on a positive conversation she had with another player about the guild earlier.

\textsuperscript{75}DotH is a Horde faction guild. Only players with Horde characters may join. The Alliance faction guild, Daughters of the Alliance, is its sister guild, although each guild has different officers and slightly different governance styles (although both maintain a females-only membership policy). It is very common for players to have Alliance characters in DotA and Horde characters in DotH at the same time.

\textsuperscript{76}WoW_Ladies does not limit access to its LJ community based on gender or sexual orientation but does maintain a strict posting policy regarding online social behaviors that acts as a gate-keeper for continued membership.
Vetting

Exclusion can also be seen in the offline recruitment strategies that the table-top role-playing *The Deliverers* use. Because of the explicit nature that takes place in playing ugly, recruitment is not advertised and is not actively engaged. While four members have maintained an active presence within the group for over a decade (and some for over two), four members were introduced to the group within the last three years and of those four, three are still presently playing. This small group of players does maintain ties outside of the game, some because of romantic relationships and others because of family or work involvement. Indeed, the two youngest members of the group—my teenaged daughter and Patty, who is in her mid-twenties, are the most recent recruits and both were initially met with reservation due to the “adult everything.” It was only through a process of vetting that took place that allowed for their initial involvement. For Patty, this vetting took place through employment. As fellow writing mentors, Patty and Hans worked together and both came into contact with my and Ula’s students regularly. Discussions of video games, music, fantasy fiction, and *Dungeons & Dragons* eventually led to her asking Hans to join the group. Only after discussing her request with the rest of the members and then participating on a trial basis for a night, was she invited to join. This same process was used when my daughter joined the group. Since Hans and Ula had known

---

77 The naming of the group, *The Deliverers*, is a bit arbitrary. Since the members of this group play a variety of different RPGs, naming the group was met with a bit of confusion by other players. These players do not identify as a team in the same way that an online guild might identify themselves by a guild name. Since the players are all friends outside of the game, the group identity is not as important as the friendships between the players.

78 *The Deliverers* do not engage in just taboo play, but the play-style does contain the element of taboo in some way most of the time. This may also be a matter of who is running the game, too. Since the present DM/GM has created the majority of the campaigns for the last few years, this taboo play may be part of that specific storyteller’s style.

79 Ula, interview by author, March 14, 2014.
her for her entire life, they were already familiar with her personality, her gaming interests, and musical preferences and when she made the request to join, all of these factors were weighed against the age issue. While all of the male players interviewed had stressed that their involvement with D&D started around the same age, introducing a new player into an adult group was met with ambivalence. On the one hand, she was at the age where members could identify with her interest in this “secret club”\textsuperscript{80} that is D&D, and on the other, adults would be role-playing deviant\textsuperscript{81} behavior in front of a minor. She was invited on a temporary basis initially to gauge how well she fit with the group and within six months was playing every Saturday as a full member in all campaigns.

Vetting, therefore, is not only about “a good fit,” but about access. Since both online and land based recruitment strategies rely heavily on word of mouth, there has to be a way to decide who will have access to these groups that goes beyond similar gaming interests and desires. As one DotH member stressed, there are numerous opportunities for guild specialization dependent on similar interests. But “special interest guilds”\textsuperscript{82} are not the same thing as a female-only guild with gender identification vetting processes, either. And one D&D table-top group is not the same as another. While there have been other players with ample experience playing RPGs who have shown interest in joining The Deliverers, for example, those players have never been asked to join due to a perceived lack of “good fit.” This vetting is hardly unique to these two groups. Players interviewed who weren’t members of either group discussed these same aspects of

\textsuperscript{80}Hans, interview by author, March 14, 2014.

\textsuperscript{81} Deviance in this case is purely verbal. All role-playing in this group is through dialogue and description. In this dissertation, deviance, playing ugly, and taboo play all refer to aspects of the play-style most commonly used in The Deliverers table-top group.

\textsuperscript{82} Roz, interview by author, June 13, 2014.
vetting that had less to do with common interest and more to do with the social interactions between players that allowed for a level of trust. Grouping with random players could impact game play since randomness could not be vetted beforehand. “I used to get just random friend requests, random team requests. It’s like nobody I would have ever played with, or interacted with, just coming out of nowhere.”83 Vetting, therefore, allows for a level of control of the game experience that prevents anonymous players from hijacking the agency of another player. Vetting as an exclusionary practice, keeps privacy central by allowing players to control the means and methods in which group participation can take place.

**Governance**

This control of the means and methods is a core aspect of privacy that both online and tabletop RPGs possess, whether this process happens through explicit or implicit governance. Governance, in this sense, does not include the non-negotiable tenets of the actual game designs—*WoW*’s EULA and ToU, for example, are iron-clad legal agreements that make very clear to the player what can and cannot be done with the game itself. Governance outside of these legal tenets is player driven—particularly in an RPG like *WoW* where guild involvement is a cornerstone of the social experience. Governance in this sense refers to the social contracts and codes that are put in place that, according to Esther MacCallum-Stewart, derive from player understood behaviors. They are the “tenets laid down by individuals with the game who have no design power or automatically conferred authority.”84 While she argues that these tenets are connected to appropriate behaviors between players and behaviors associated with fair game

---

83 Ruby, interview by author, April 3, 2014.

play,85 these tenets are still highly negotiated. As René Glas emphasizes, these social contracts may apply to all players in the game as a whole (the negative associations with cheating for example), but acceptable and inacceptable behaviors vary depending on those “socially negotiated boundaries.”86

It’s these boundaries that tie directly to the ways in which DotH and The Deliverers negotiate how members participate within the community once inclusion has taken place. As Glas emphasizes, players “organize themselves both loosely and tenaciously in groups.”87 The social contract that DotH has in place regarding the ways in which the guild is governed speaks to this tenacity—not only in terms of the social contract associated with the guild rules, but also in the ways in which governance actually happens. DotH guild rules are highly codified. Every rule is explicit. But enforcement of those rules is community wide and shared including a shared governance approach concerning the officers in the guild. Officers are rotated out about every three months so that there is a constant influx of new voices sharing guild responsibilities. These responsibilities range from mediation, to raid planning, to mentoring, to in-game party planning. For The Deliverers, governance is far looser in terms of explicit codes, but the approach is more top-down, rather than shared. Because table-top role-playing games require a large amount of creative work and pre-planning in order to be effective, the DM or GM has far more control over player input since the majority of the preparation falls upon the DM/GM. This isn’t to imply that there is an imbalance of power, however. While the majority of the work falls on the storyteller,

85 Ibid.


87 Ibid.
the player audience is still expected to be an active participant. In *The Deliverers*, the use of sanctions, for example, requires players to call the DM/GM out for derogatory remarks and dialogue and players police each other’s behaviors in the same way. While these social codes are implied, they are still enforced by all members and individual members still have input into who can participate in the group and who cannot.

**Ideocultures and Governance**

Fine’s analysis of what he termed “ideocultures” highlights why there may be such distinct differences in governance styles between *DotH* and *The Deliverers*, as well as for players outside of these two groups.

An idioculture is a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and imply as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences and that these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, and can be employed to construct a shared universe of discourse.89

It’s this emphasis on a constructed discourse that seems cogent here. Because of the spatial boundaries that limit face-to-face interactions with players online, the highly codified and shared governance structure of *DotH* would help group cohesion since membership in an all-female guild relies so heavily on privacy and safety from the wider gaming environment in *WoW*. Because the guild is considered by its members to be a safe place to play and interact, without having to deal with toxicity associated with gaming-while-female, this discourse requires explicit codes in order to be able to maintain that level of control within the larger player ecology.

---

88 All members, including the DM/GM, perform a given role that, as Fine would stress in defining ideocultures, is expected due to the nature of the shared experience.

89 Ibid., 136.
But this constructed discourse also applies to *The Deliverers* in a seemingly opposite way—while the codes are far more implied, the discourse within this specific group of players allows for the existence of playing ugly in a way that still allows the game space to be considered safe in spite of the explicit nature of the game play itself. Indeed, to an outsider, both groups seem to be something that they aren’t: while a female-only guild might be perceived as a possible threat to the larger gaming environment (at least based on the vehemence reserved for a player looking to join one in a general game forum on battle.net), the guild operates as a means to participate in that same gaming ecology but on their own explicit terms—terms that do not include explicit change to that larger gaming ecology.

For *The Deliverers*, inclusion of a mostly female, mostly liberal, mostly hyper-educated group of friends could be seen as a kind of feminist gamer fantasy. And yet, the ugly play that players engage in could be seen by outsiders as highly toxic since the same issues of sexism, misogyny, racism, and ableism that taint online and console gaming are used as parts of the storytelling process and consumed as a part of the playing experience. Again, privacy is highly guarded as a means of dealing with a larger table-top gaming community[^90] (at least as it pertains to those gamers who “wouldn’t fit” with the group) and the top down governance style addresses why privacy is so central: since the work of a storyteller of taboo play has the most social capital to lose due to the explicit nature of the game, that DM/GM has more pull in how stuff gets done and by whom.

**Ancillary Media and Textual Reinforcements**

But the group identity social components that help foster intimacy are not only found within the specific places where play happens. There are ancillary media uses *outside* of the games that

[^90]: Very few players interviewed found gaming with strangers to be enjoyable, particularly table-top.
players use to promote intimacy. *DotH* maintains a private Facebook group where players can post raid sign ups, guild meeting times, or news articles concerning *WoW*. Sometimes, a player will post a *WoW* meme located on another player-led ancillary site and members will comment. Facebook is home to numerous private and public *WoW* fan groups and *DotH* reposts and shares numerous pictures from other fan sites including *Girls, Booze and Worldofwarcraft, Legit Lady Gamers, Worldofwarcraft memes, and Warcraft complaints.*

![Image](http://wowmemesandjokes.com/memes/random/635288366559024100.png)

Figure 1. “If You Wanted a Heal” Meme

In the case of the meme posted in figure 1, one player shared the photo, which was then liked and commented upon by other guild members. Members focused not only on agreeing with the sentiment expressed in the meme, but also focused on positioning the guild itself as separate from the behavior. As the player who shared the meme stated, “We’re pretty good at this. Pugs, not so much.”


92 A Pug is a reference to a pickup group. Pugs are a notoriously hit-or-miss positive experience due to the anonymity. Since they are groups of strangers playing together, no prior knowledge of ability or interpersonal communication is known. See *WoWWiki*, s.v. “Pickup Group,” last modified March 3, 2014, [www.wowwiki.com/Pickup_group](http://www.wowwiki.com/Pickup_group).
others focused on the attributed age. Both of these kinds of comments place the guild in opposition to negative behaviors that are known to happen when playing with strangers—intimacy allows for clearer communication and synergy when grouping with friends. Since guild members who play together know how to work as a team already, they can work as a high function play unit. Strangers do not have the luxury of personal context. The meme, therefore, helps reinforce group cohesion because it balances an identification with acceptable and denial of unacceptable behaviors. By agreeing with the sentiment, players are able to assert that legitimacy of their own gaming/group identity.

The table-top gaming group, The Deliverers, also use ancillary media to promote group cohesion and intimacy—through the use of private newsletters sent via email within a week after the specific play event. Past members also receive the email as a way of staying connected. As Ula stated,

I almost wonder if it solidifies group affiliation in a way. It’s all from Hans’s perspective of course…you know it can be funny, or endearing, or there’s that sort of underlying message of teasing. Because we all know each other so well. So, I know that he’s embedded things in there sort of like inside jokes. Someone else reading those is going to miss certain things, because they don’t know us. The visual stuff can be so gross, or just weird or funny…or he is just really, like, sticking his thumb in your eye.

These newsletters are intentionally antagonistic at times. Individual players get called out, as well as the player’s character—sometimes interchangeably. For example, in the newsletter in figure 2, all names refer only to characters. But the third page of the newsletter in figure 3 switches between the players in and out of character so much that only those players who were there that night would understand the context of the statements.
D&D newsletter created in 2012. While genitalia were a common graphic prior to 2012, as of 2013 there is a minor in the group, and newsletters after 2012 do not contain as much explicit sexual content (although subtext is still used). All pictures used in the newsletters derive from web searches using Google. While Hans has created the majority of the newsletters, I was responsible for two prior to 2012. Finding the “right” pictures takes far longer than the writing portion. Balancing wit, snark, humor, and accurate reporting of the night’s activities is challenging. Newsletters are a highly anticipated portion of the game experience and players usually reply to the emails with their evaluation within hours of receiving them. The shock value is almost as important as the humor. This newsletter is considered quite tame compared to others, but is considered infamous due to the breastfeeding dog.
The way that the newsletter contributes to intimacy is not only tied to how the writer (in this case the DM/GM) discusses the night’s events, but also in the way it acknowledges the relationships between players (and not just characters). The “Best Lines of the Night” section...

---

94 This *D&D* campaign did bring in elements of playing ugly, although this play-style is stressed far more in darker RPG campaigns in *Vampire*. In the case of the *D&D* campaign, there were numerous discussions before, during, and after the massacre of the gnoll nursery. I do remember arguments at the time over the nature of evil—whether slaughtering offspring of a truly evil entity was morally questionable. Because gnolls are of evil alignment, age is irrelevant. A group of good aligned characters would be morally bound to exterminate evil...even a newborn. While some players were horrified by the slaughter, other players embraced it. The newsletter’s use of cute pictures of animals juxtaposed with images of slaughter help reinforce the absurdity. It’s the facing of this kind of moral ambiguity that playing ugly reveals.
shows this by referencing the meta-gaming\(^{95}\) that takes place in *D&D* and other RPGs. Since meta-gaming is an intentional tool that players use to step out of the magic circle—kind of like a “time out” that stops the clock in a baseball game,\(^{96}\) any discussions that acknowledge the literal construction of the game are a player’s way of also establishing a reciprocal performance. For example, in the “Best Lines of the Night” section, the reference to graph paper dictating dungeon size is a way for players to call out the designer i.e. the DM/GM and poke fun at the design decision. In this way, all members within the group acknowledge each other’s roles. The newsletter, then, is the DM’s way of recognizing that intimate relationship includes everyone within the group.

These player created materials are also common practices for players outside of these two groups. Many of those interviewed keep blogs highlighting their RPG events—particularly those players with storytelling and DM/GM experience or backgrounds in creative writing, and use them in the same way that the newsletter is used for *The Deliverers*. Private guild pages highlighting player accomplishments are also common. Indeed, on *DotH*’s home guild page on LiveJournal,\(^{97}\) they maintain a special posting every Tuesday (which is usually the day that *WoW* will shut down for routine maintenance) where players post various cute animal Gifs and memes. Since players are unable to log onto the game, the guild website becomes another vector for group affiliation.

---


\(^{97}\) As of 2015, the *DotH* guild page has switched locations. While they still maintain a LiveJournal presence, the new guild page is located at [www.daughtersofthehorde.enjin.com](http://www.daughtersofthehorde.enjin.com).
The point is that all of these ancillary materials help players stay connected with one another when the game is no longer in session and are entirely designed to strengthen group affiliations through intimate reinforcements. T. L Taylor emphasizes that it’s these other connections that must be included as part of an overall game world analysis and that “any discussion of game life must include a model of the distributed social sphere.” And outsiders to the game, to the guild, to the D&D/Vampire campaign, are excluded from the private contexts that govern these connections. It’s this aspect that complicates Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle further—if the boundaries of play bleed through, seep into other aspects of the players’ lives, but still maintain the ritualized space of the game itself and actually reinforce the ties within their groups, then the boundaries that separate the two must be permeable. Huizinga’s distinction of “ordinary life” from play emphasizes play’s “limitedness” and “secludedness,” and in some ways these elements do still exist, but logging off or driving home from a night of gaming follow the player home, as well.

Who Needs Group Identity?

In the introductory chapter to Questions of Identity, Stuart Hall explores the ways in which identity cannot be thought of as a purely independent entity. It is relational and only derives meaning through an understanding of that which is different.

---


99 One player referred to this bleed through as an infection—something that spreads from player to player. It’s an interesting metaphor pertaining to exclusion/inclusion and the role of agency in shaping gamer identity. Bleed is an aspect of safety, as well.

100 Ibid., 9.
This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the "positive" meaning of any term--and thus its "identity"--can be constructed. . . . Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their power to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abjected. Every identity has at its "margin", an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity threatens as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it "lacks."¹⁰¹

Hall’s point is crucial in understanding the ways in which inclusion and exclusion are tied so closely to intimacy in RPGs. Group identity requires a boundary in order to make sense to each player, and yet the competing identity formations already in place do the same. In order to differentiate, in order to belong, RPG groups must be able to separate themselves from the abject in order for that group to achieve any form of intimacy.

This intimacy, therefore, is highly situational and relies on a clear understanding of who belongs within and who doesn’t. Intimacy is one possible effect of the discourses that take place once the construction of a group identity manifests. As Hall argues, identity happens through discourse, not outside of it and it’s because of this emphasis on movement, from an x to a y, which makes this process active, rather than passive. The work of belonging does not end since it’s so highly connected to an ever-changing state of being: “Not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that

bears on how we might represent ourselves.” So, in effect, by establishing boundaries—not just in the establishment of a private (separate-yet-constitutive) positioning, but also in terms of the codified rules that give the border between $x$ and $y$ shape, players can withstand other competing boundaries and identities.

**Access through Boundary Formations**

“Privacy,” according to W. James Potter, “is about boundaries. We share certain kinds of information with friends but not with strangers, so we draw a line between our circle of friends and everyone else.” For Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, access is a fundamental ethical concern for participatory culture. But access for Staci Newmahr, is highly connected to Georg Simmel’s understanding of the way that intimacy allows for the access to another’s full self, including those aspects that make that self most vulnerable. Intimacy “therefore depends on the cultivation of a belief in the privacy of a particular experience. What is intimate is that which is normally not apparent, accessible, or available. It is therefore always dependent on whether the access is perceived as commonly available or highly guarded.”

So boundaries, in one sense, could be seen as a way of differentiating between “friends and everyone else,”—but requires a level of self-disclosure in order for that friendship to be

---

102 Ibid., 4.


considered intimate.106 Those boundaries also have to be negotiated for those inside the group in a way that allows its members to trust that those boundaries can be eliminated. Vulnerability is a key idea here. Allowing for vulnerability is tied directly to the concept of safety. The next chapter analyzes just how concepts of vulnerability and safety relate to trust in fostering an intimate play environment.

---

CHAPTER TWO. IT’S A WEIRD LOYALTY THING: INTIMACY THROUGH TRUST

Patty quit. We think. Of course it was about the blowup, even though she just kind of disappeared. No phone calls, no emails, no direct confrontations. Just absent. He shouldn’t have gone so far, so personal with a player so relatively new. The rest of us are used to Hans’s verbal attacks—argument is part of the night. Usually. It’s part of our game—learning how to navigate all of our mood swings and drunken tangents and overstepped boundaries. It’s the kind of navigation that can only happen after years of trust and connection. And now we are sitting in the living room with the dark blue walls and the dark leather couch and the Tiffany style lamps and that damned dog who seriously matches the furniture quite perfectly. He stole my shoe. Again. It’s game night and Patty is not here. My daughter is out with friends, too, and the vibe in the room is different without either of them. It’s comfortable and steeped in familial subtext despite the electric undercurrent of rejection that feels like betrayal.

These intimate spaces are so fragile even if the people who play here have the luxury of time-tempered familiarity.

“Do you know how much time I spent with her prepping for her campaign?” Hans says. “Months. All of that work teaching her how to GM, just gone.” And you can tell that Hans isn’t saying what is really bothering him. He wanted to play for once, instead of just running the game, just being the storyteller. And he misses her. “From now on, let’s just play every other week,” he says. “Otherwise, I’m going to get burned out if I have to keep doing all of it.” And then it doesn’t just feel like betrayal. It feels like punishment.

“Let’s just play with our present members for now. I don’t think we need any new people.” And then, the conversation turns back to Vampire.

***
Trust is slippery. Some researchers doubt that it is even possible in purely virtual relationships. Phillip Pettit, for example, posits that there are two distinct forms of trust: primary and secondary. Primary trust relies on the ability to find another trustworthy—that “they are possessed of stable, ground-level dispositions that you are able to engage by acts of manifest reliance.” Secondary trust relies more on seeking the regard of another—something that Pettit refers to as “trust-responsiveness,” and is therefore dependent on a reciprocity that comes about as a result of that intended regard. Reputation, for example, is not only dependent on the individual’s level of trustworthiness, but another’s reputation is also at risk if support of that trust is violated. Pettit stresses that virtual relationships, then, cannot overcome the primary trust issues because “face, frame, or file” are unidentifiable, and trustworthiness is demoted to pure fantasy. Since there is no face-to-face interaction in order to judge body language, the body itself is unreadable, as well as character, and seeing the ways in which these “specters” interact over time with other possible specters further limits that trustworthiness. Secondary trust, therefore, is not possible since these “spectral presences”, i.e. whom he refers to as Internet people rather

---


109 Guilt by association is at play here, too. Because reputation does not just affect the individual but also those who show support and esteem for that individual, issues of credibility are at stake. This tit-for-tat aspect of trust-responsiveness is the performance of a trust act—which is mutually dependent, and therefore risky.

110 Pettit made special note of the unreadability of really knowing “his” from “her” in terms of character, as well. See Phillip Pettit, “Trust, Reliance, and the Internet,” 118.

111 Ibid., 119.

112 Ibid., 118.
than real people, all know the limitations of these kinds of trust acts. The understanding of these disconnections is exactly what keeps “these pure Internet contacts” from allowing truth-responsiveness.\textsuperscript{113}

There are problems with the distinctions he draws, though. Indeed, Paul B. Laat emphasizes that Pettit’s views on virtual trust are fundamentally inaccurate—there are far too many examples of trust occurring on a daily basis to argue otherwise. The rise of virtual economies, internet banking trade-based communities, hackers, online support networks, PayPal…they are all evidence of virtual trust.\textsuperscript{114} Laat argues that there are mechanisms in place that allow such formations. Reputation systems and intermediaries are prime examples of trust in market systems.\textsuperscript{115} Social cues\textsuperscript{116} and “hyperactive styles of action”\textsuperscript{117} are required in task-based and non-task-based groups which seem to bypass primary trust in favor of going straight to trust-responsiveness. Park and Chung have also researched the role of self-presentation in establishing trust in MMORPGs and their work echoes some of the ways that self-presentation are tied to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{113}Ibid., 119.
\item \textsuperscript{114}Paul B. Laat, “Trusting Virtual Trust,” \textit{Ethics and Information Technology} 7, no. 3 (September 2005): 172, Electronic Journal Center.
\item \textsuperscript{115}Ibid., 172-173.
\item \textsuperscript{116}Ibid., 174. Guild websites are a prime example of this since the “About Us” sections serve as virtual guild personality profiles.
\item \textsuperscript{117}Ibid., 177. The hyperactive mode bypasses the slower face-to-face interactions attributed to land-based task groups. A hyperactive mode seems like an adaptation predicated on “responding adequately”—it’s a way of cutting through the chaff to get the work completed. Laat focuses on hackers and students as prime adopters of hyperactive action.
\end{itemize}
identity and avatar creation. 118 Participants, in other words, adapt to the medium in order to achieve trust.

There are two main reasons why looking at Pettit and Laat begin this chapter. While both authors highlight key concerns about the nature of trust and the possible mechanisms that help contribute, they also offer insights into why trust is such an important concept when analyzing intimacy within RPGs. Pettit acknowledges, for example, that these problems of trust happen “when we enter the Internet without connection to existing, real-world networks of association and friendship.” 119 Laat takes issue with Pettit’s understanding of virtual as opposed to these “real-world” distinctions by arguing that “pure virtuals do not really exist.” 120 Both points can be applied to MMORPGs and table-top RPGs because trust is an actively constructed process that requires an adaptable mindset in order to prevent the real world from interfering. 121

As the above focus illustrates, trust isn’t something that merely happens between players, whether online or offline. It’s a constantly negotiated process that must be in place if players are going to be able to work together in game and out of game. Trust of the game, trust between players, and trust in the gaming community are not separate layers of the gaming process, either. They are all cohesive elements that build upon one another. But one key aspect that also binds these three elements is the understanding of safety (and not just risk) and its role in allowing


121 In this case, I am using the concept of the “real world” as a synonym for negative player behaviors that stem from outside of the game world. These are the problems that players bring with them into the games they play. This is related to concepts of bleed, as well.
players to stay connected to the game, to the individual players, and to the community at large. Safety, in other words, must be actively constructed not only by the game design proper, but also by the players within their private play environments. This chapter focuses on how some players have constructed safe play environments as a way of understanding how safety is tied not only to comfort but also to immersion. Harassment and toxicity in a gaming environment can prevent affected players from participating fully within RPGs since immersion is a key investment in the gaming experience. But because affected players have found ways to actively construct safe gaming environments on their own terms, successful immersion is still available and players are able to achieve player agency.

Immersion, safety, even nostalgia—they all factor into the ways in which trust function as a prerequisite for an intimate play community. Immersion, in this chapter, is analyzed in two specific ways—by looking at the disruptions that can affect immersion and therefore act as impediments to full participation and by looking at the negative perceptions that players have concerning that overly immersed player state. In both cases, immersion affects the ways these players trust their fellow players and games.

**Safety**

“He threatened to hunt me down and shoot me in the head with a .22.”¹²²

“Well, I picked up a stalker; that was the breaking experience that kind of warded me off of playing with strangers.”¹²³

“I was like, *I’m pretty sure I’m being stalked by this guy.*”¹²⁴

---

¹²² Uulir, interview by author, April 22, 2014.

¹²³ Agnes.

¹²⁴ Ruby.
“I didn’t want to just have my feelings hurt all the time with boys and video games and girls don’t play.”

“Just with it being an all female guild there weren’t slurs about rape.”

“It becomes this huge hate-fest with some really nasty things thrown around.”

“The first day I joined World of Warcraft, my ‘toon was sexually assaulted in Dolanaar.”

“It’s the rape comments. I don’t see that in guild chat ever. I appreciate that.”

These are just a sampling of the comments that players made concerning their gaming experiences—those that took place online in MMORPGs as well as in their table-top RPGs. All of these player comments address core concerns associated with safety and why their present guilds and gaming communities are necessary forces they use in combating safety concerns. In the previous chapter, when discussing the vitriol unleashed upon female gamers seeking female-only guilds, the players who responded assumed that wanting to join a female-only guild was about proving something, starting trouble, or competing against male players. Sometimes, competition may be the case—gamers can be quite competitive and some of the comments directed towards the initial vitriol acknowledged that proving their female-gamer-kick-ass-ability was important, but not one comment acknowledged that gaming as anything other than a

---

125Candi, interview by author, April 22, 2014.

126 Riley, interview by author, April 3, 2014.

127Alaina.

128Roz.


130Some of the later comments from other forum participants (who I am assuming are female based on the way they self-identified) did mention having pride in their gaming ability and wanting to show other gamers that their play ability as a female gamer was something they
young, white, heterosexual male, which is usually perceived as the neutral default identity for gamers, might be dangerous. But these female players’ experiences are steeped in these kinds of dismissals and micro and not so micro aggressions. Desiring a female-only guild is not about being “clannish” or “synchronizing periods.” It’s, in part, about safety and women must “accept the male-subject position silently, or risk constant discrimination and harassment if they reveal that they are female.” Indeed, this reinforces Brignall’s understanding of why negative tribalistic behavior is so prevalent in WoW: the lack of repercussions coupled with low social responsibility are part of the game and a female player (or any other non-white non-heteronormative male), needs to be, as Yee states, “constantly reminded of the intended male subject position they are trespassing on” in order to not be seen as a threat to that larger competition.

were proud of. Other players also acknowledged that female players in their own guilds were some of the strongest players and leaders in those guilds. What is interesting to note is that these kinds of confident assertions were not challenged in the forum directly. The confident posts were usually in response to negative comments—which were not followed up by further harassment. The more voices that challenged the derogatory remarks effectively shut down the harassing forum posts. See “Any all female Guilds/Raid teams?” accessed February 19-22, 2013, www.us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/7924333946?page=1.

131 Jessica L. Beyer, “(Dis)embodied Engagement with Male-Dominated Online Communities,” in Gajjala and Ju Oh, Cyberfeminism 2.0, 156.


133 Brignall, “Guild Life,” in Adams and Smith, Electronic Tribes, 118.

In table-top role-playing, some of these same issues can apply, even if the physical proximity of players allows for a more immediate identification of gender. Agnes, a German student studying in the U.S., discussed how her own experiences have impacted her choices. Basically it was just a guy who was troubled and he was drawn to games, because I never blamed the game for anything because the games don’t make anybody anything. I just feel like a lot of people are drawn to games for different reasons. Well he had a crush on me. I turned him down, and then he couldn’t let it go. He was a Werewolf player, which is now I don’t…I don’t play that. It creeped me out before that too, but now I really don’t like them.

For Uulir, table-top D&D was also problematic. “I dabbled in Dungeons & Dragons a little bit but I quickly got out of that because I was in a game that was with five guys. One day, one of them felt like it would be hilarious to open the door in his underwear when I came over.” Both of these negative experiences mirror Sarah Lynn Bowman’s analysis of the ways in which intimacy can actually undermine the social structure in gaming groups, however her analysis framed intimacy as a purely romantic endeavor involving unrequited crushes and “undesirable mating strategies.” This approach to intimacy does not account for intimate relationships outside of romance, however—whereas Newmahr’s understanding of intimacy distinctly posits that “[i]ntimacy is not about love, sex, or tenderness, but about access to emotional and physical experiences that we consider inaccessible to most people.” In both Agnes and Uulir’s

---


136 Bowman, The Functions of Role-Playing Games, 9.

137 Newmahr, Playing on the Edge, 171.
experiences, safety and intimacy were at odds specifically because of Yee’s “intended male subject position.”\textsuperscript{138} But as Marie Hicks argues, this isn’t just about every male subject—it’s intended for a \textit{heterosexual} male subject position and that the kinds of experiences that Agnes and Uulir discuss “tell us more about threatened heteronormativity than about differences between women and men.”\textsuperscript{139} These experiences were not about intimacy, then. They were about power.

Benjamin Friedline and Lauren Collister analyze the relationship between language and power in \textit{WoW} by incorporating Kiesling’s understanding of the “power role.”\textsuperscript{140} To summarize, power is understood to be situated in all cultures and societies, is intergenerational and unchanging (or at least resistant), relative to both speaker and hearer, relative to pre-existing social roles, and relative to the desired effect the participant envisions.\textsuperscript{141} Friedline and Collister argue that in order for players to “earn” the right to use more powerful language styles, such in-

\textsuperscript{138} Yee, “Maps,” 92.

\textsuperscript{139} Marie Hicks, “De-Programming the History of Computing,” \textit{IEEE Annals of the History of Computing} 35, no.1 (2013): 86, Electronic Journal Center. Hicks specifically focuses on “programmer” culture found in the high tech industry based out of Silicon Valley, although the same issues of harassment can be applied outside. She argues that computer historians must acknowledge this emphasis on the performance of hetero-masculinity in order to provide a richer understanding of social context. By “queering our approach” she suggests that computer historians will be able to work through some of the assumptions that usually get made when conflating gender with sexuality (and the class privileges that are embedded within).


\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
game aspects as gear level and experience help shape that access.\textsuperscript{142} This would seem to be a basis for the power struggles that manifest not only online in MMORPGs, but also in table-top RPGs. But the gendered aspects of the way these power struggles manifest complicate this further. Gear level and experience are not the only way of establishing a power role. A heteronormative male subject position also helps to establish access.\textsuperscript{143}

\textbf{“Male Role-Players Norm”}

But even when members are not strangers, as is the case in \textit{The Deliverers}, there are still negotiations that take place along gender lines that can get territorial. During the course of the interview with Ula concerning the interpersonal conflicts that can arise between members and the DM/GM, she emphasized that she was put into a strange position being the wife of the DM. “It’s a weird loyalty thing, being the wife of the person running the game. And having it at your house. It’s like being on trial. It’s really weird.” This positioning does allow for a united front when faced with criticism, but it also makes negotiations more challenging when familial ties are tested. Hans also conveyed a sense of adjustment that happens due to the gender dynamics in the group. “Because my experience is when there’s only one woman at the table, that woman will conform to the male role-players norm.”\textsuperscript{144} All of a sudden you get two or three women at the

\textsuperscript{142}\textit{Ibid.}, 212. According to Friedline and Collister, access to these language styles hinges on what Pettit would refer to as trust-responsiveness. The perception of credibility allows for that access to more aggressive/powerful language.

\textsuperscript{143}So one way to frame the beginning journal entry concerning Patty’s rejection of the gaming group is to look at the event as a power negotiation that backfired due to an assumption of access that did not actually exist.

\textsuperscript{144}Hans explained that “male role-players norm” meant you stayed in character and never broke from play. You were “in that world” until the game was finished. And it was a reference to playing at the age of 14 with male friends with no responsibilities. This “norm,” in other words, was partly shaped by nostalgia.
table, they’re like *we’re going to break for a little bit of food…we’re going to have a drink.* I think I’ve learned to roll with this fairly well. But it is a huge change.  

Franz also emphasized that playing in a table-top group where the majority of the players are women does offer different perspectives.

They just, they behave differently in a game and they do things different than what a male…typically the male players we tend to think strategy more than reaction, so we plan things out more. Where women tend to look at a larger picture. As long as we get there, that’s all that really matters. I might go ‘you took *seven* steps, I took *four.* I was clearly better at it than you, even though we both got this objective.’

But Yee’s emphasis on the constant reminding of the intended male subject position does get complicated when analyzing how players react within an RPG group like *The Delivers.* Both Hans and Franz framed their understandings of *all* female players along preconceived gender stereotypes e.g. women socialize and men strategize, but both also acknowledged that they had limited involvement with female players outside of *The Delivers.* While Hans did state that he introduced previous girlfriends to *D&D* when he was in college, neither had any experience with female players while actually learning the game i.e. when they were teenagers. Indeed, when my

---

145 Hans, interview by author, March 13, 2014. One thing that stands out with this interview is that more often than not when a game is in session, Hans is the one who initiates smoke, music, dog, and drink breaks. Ula initiates food breaks. Indeed, it is very often that the majority of the gaming night will be devoted to gossip about friends, coworkers, and families—and all members have initiated these moments regardless of gender.

146 Franz, interview by author, June 13, 2014. The game night after this interview, he purposefully used that “7 vs. 4 steps” line in-game directed towards his girlfriend. These kinds of comments are used to bait fellow female members as an opportunity to sanction. Female members are expected to respond to the comment, usually with profanity. Note: this in-game teasing directly contradicts Hans’s assertion of “male role-players norm” of staying in character at all times.
daughter first joined the group at age 14, both Hans and Franz joked about the strangeness of a
teenaged girl wanting to play with a bunch of old people. When gender is raised in the course of
a gaming night (which occurs quite often), it usually gets framed as humorous self-deprecation.
It is quite common for either male to state “if you would have ever told me that I would be
playing D&D with this many hot chicks, I would have called bullshit.” Indeed, “playing with hot
chicks” is an explicit reminder of that heteronormative male subject position, but it also allows
for a response from the other female members in the group, as well as an acknowledgement of
how RPGs can be perceived as an emasculating hobby where only socially awkward man-boys
participate at the expense of the stereotypical “gamer widow.”

Furthermore, there have been past players within The Deliverers that have complicated this
subject position further. One beloved past player, Jack, who left the state to pursue a doctorate,
was initially met with reservation due to his identification as gay. All members of the group
acknowledged that it wasn’t his sexuality that was the prime issue, though. They were far more
worried that the play-style would offend him since gender-play was sometimes incorporated in a
derogatory way. It took months of requests (Jack and Hans worked together on a daily basis)
before the group agreed. Although Jack had been warned about the “adult nature” of the group,
the anxiety of accepting new membership was still present due to the exposure that came with
membership. However, there was an immediate chemistry between most of the players and
Jack’s membership was met with very little fanfare.¹⁴⁷ This may have been due to the power role
that Jack was able to manifest. While a heteronormative male subject position was still present

¹⁴⁷ One player did end up leaving the group for good after this. While the group thought it
might have been in part due to homophobia, there was an immediate tension between Jack and
this other player that seemed more territorial in nature due to Jack’s tendency to challenge this
other player’s role as the DM (this campaign was one of the few Hans did not run and instead
left the DMing to this other player, instead).
with other members, Jack’s ability to “dish it out” solidified his position within the group. Indeed, his ability to shock contributed to his immediate acceptance. All members still talk about that time that Jack announced to Hans and Franz, “we all know cum is fucking delicious” and the horrified looks on their faces then followed by boisterous laughter. The fact that Jack was able to illicit that kind of response from Hans and Franz spoke to that power role, in spite of a non-heteronormative subject position.

In these cases, the male members within The Deliverers have found a way to negotiate a new player environment where they are not the sole arbiters of the game experience (although this is not always met with instant approval, either). What is interesting to note, though, is that while my daughter is protected from the majority of the verbal sparring that happens throughout the course of the night—primarily due to her age and maturity level,¹⁴⁸ she is not protected from witnessing others participate. And while she has said that the screaming does make her uncomfortable at times, it has never affected the gaming experience in a way that would prevent her from participating. This attitude towards discomfort is assumed to be held by most members in the group.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ My daughter’s relationships with the various members in The Deliverers are complicated. She is sometimes treated as a cohort, as a little sister to be protected, as a mascot, or as a daughter. As a cheeky acknowledgement of the confusing nature of a young teenaged girl’s desire to role-play with adult men and women, Hans has taken to referring to himself as “Uncle Hansy”—complete with an exaggerated gravelly voice meant to sound like a “dirty old drunk man.” The performance of Uncle Hansy is met with raucous laughter and is an intentional self-deprecation meant to include my daughter into the group in a way that doesn’t make her feel uncomfortable. Uncle Hansy is a joke and therefore a defanged sexual non-threat. It’s this complicated gendered performance that disrupts Yee’s understanding of intended male subject positions.

¹⁴⁹ Hence, Patty’s rejection is viewed as surprising if viewed from within, but not so surprising when viewed from without.
Anonymity and Accountability

Another aspect to consider is that safety does not necessarily have to be associated with physical assault for there to be discomfort (although for female online players, this was the case more often than not). For many of the male players interviewed, interactions with strangers could lead to abandoning the game entirely. Franz stated, “I don’t want to do it online where I don’t know who the people are. I want to be with them face to face, so I get a better understanding of who they are and how they are behaving and why they are doing it. Is this person really a jerk or are they just playing their character that way?”

And even when players do play online with fellow guild members, the guild members may still make players uncomfortable by promoting toxicity. When discussing an ancillary guild that he had joined in *Guild Wars II*, for example, Topher stressed that he had to quit due to the hostility.

Because they were talking a lot about the right of male gamers to play with the female avatar, in kind of a super derogatory way, which I do play [the female avatar], not always. But it then turned into, like, I threw something in about drag, 150 and then it turned into a lot of kind of personal attacks. I don’t remember most of the language that they actually used anymore. But it quickly became just kind of a really hostile place. I just left and like currently blocked most of the people on there. I was just, *I might never run into you again, but just in case I didn’t want to know you exist.* 151

---

150 Topher occasionally performs drag in RL, as well. When I created a drag character for a *Vampire* campaign, I ended up asking him for advice.

Both Topher and Franz’s points echo what Pettit posits about the nature of trust as it relates to virtual relations. With no body language to gauge, Franz’s comfort with virtual role-playing is missing. Topher’s blocking of hostile players allows for an immediate break since primary trust was not possible. But gaming with strangers is not always met with such wariness. For some players, it’s the randomness that allows players to forge new intimacies due to the shared experience. Uulir, for example, stated that “it’s the spontaneous fun and it’s the getting together with people to do weird and crazy stuff that sometimes make no sense.” All three of these experiences highlight an aspect of Pettit’s focus on Internet people—anonymity affects trust. But Pettit’s analysis isn’t complete enough to account for Uulir’s experience. However, an analysis of disinhibition effect does.

**Disinhibition Effect**

As stated in the introduction to this dissertation, John Gabriel’s Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory” (GIFT): Normal Person + Anonymity + Audience = Total Fuckwad is a cheeky (albeit oversimplified) example of disinhibition effect. Defined by a distinct lowering of inhibitions in an *online* setting, disinhibition effect, I argue, isn’t just reserved for online. Indeed, table-top gaming also has its share of it. Anonymity seems to be the key factor here. While table-top gaming is face-to-face, a player effectively becomes anonymous with the adoption and performance of a persona. Or, at the very least, it becomes a projection of anonymity. Hence, behaviors attributed to that persona are removed from the player, proper. This is one reason why playing ugly is even possible. As Montoloa argues, it’s this understanding of the magic circle’s boundaries that allow for the existence of an alibi. The alibi allows for different rules for
different spaces and it’s the alibi that masks the performed behavior. The player isn’t as important as the performance. And as Uulir’s emphasis on benign disinhibition effect illustrates, sometimes playing with strangers can be pleasant—particularly during a cohort event that acts as a bonding moment.

But there is one aspect of online disinhibition effect that does complicate this understanding of performance. In their study of toxic online disinhibition, Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak argue that it is a lack of eye-contact that allows for an increase in toxicity (with a core focus on flaming as an example of toxicity). Franz’s point about not trusting online play reflects this—not being able to gauge motivation due to unidentifiability breaks the trust act. But lack of eye-contact doesn’t illuminate Topher’s example of hostility, rather Hicks’s emphasis on the way that heteronormative male subject positions reinforce power structures does. Because Topher threatened that subject position by discussing the female avatar form as a way of doing drag, other players attacked. This relates to Carol Stabile’s point about “doing gender” in MMOs.

---


153 Obviously, this statement isn’t meant to be completely true—players cannot be separated from their personas since players are the ones creating the performance. My point is focused more on the idea of players creating something outside of themselves—a persona separate from the player. Imaginative role-play allows for this separation and this is what allows for a cloaked presence. A player is obviously still present, but the cloak obscures enough to not see the performative strings.


The ways in which gender accountability manifests in MMOs allows for both responses—the threatened normative masculinity discourse as well as resistance to that normative position.\textsuperscript{156}

Safety is not illusive in RPGs, then. Allies not only act as buffers for hostile behavior, they can also be an integral part in promoting trust. Many players stressed that it was how other players defended them when toxicity took place that they appreciated. As Candi acknowledged, “it was nice to have someone finally stick up for you. Because you’re a girl you have to work really hard to get there. But once you’re there it’s so nice.” The push back exhibited on later forum posts involving all-female guilds also highlights this. Both points further Stabile’s point—allies help resist masculine discourses which, in turn, help promote trust between players. This could eventually lead to further challenges to the status quo that takes place in toxic gaming environments. Normalized resistance can provide a beacon for the “spectral presences” calling out unanswered.\textsuperscript{157}

\textbf{Self Replicating Bubbles}

But there is a distinct criticism that does need to be acknowledged here in regards to the larger discussion concerning the nature of designing safe spaces. Mirroring Stabile’s point, Jocelyn Hollander argues that understanding accountability requires an understanding of how resistance functions in doing gender. And that these resistances are in themselves interactions as much as gender in itself is interactional.\textsuperscript{158} But she also emphasizes that “interactions mirror the

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{156}] Ibid., 49.
\item[\textsuperscript{157}] Pettit, “Trust, Reliance and the Internet,” 118.
\item[\textsuperscript{158}] Jocelyn A. Hollander, "I demand more of people': Accountability, interaction, and gender change," \textit{Gender & Society} 27, no. 1 (February 2013): 25, PsycINFO.
\end{itemize}
status quo, they help to solidify the institution as it exists.”

This relates to Beyer’s concern about female gamers who choose to enter into a “safe” guild environment in an MMORPG such as *WoW*: “Once in these ‘bubbles’ of shared values, players opt out of experiences with people they do not know leaving common areas to those who propagate the dominant culture.” In other words, by separating themselves from the larger gaming ecology, players who opt out make themselves invisible in the process. Toxicity therefore becomes cyclical since there is no one there to keep it in the open. The status quo of toxicity solidifies without resistance to it.

Cyclical toxicity is also not just an online gamer issue, either. In fact, Beyer’s acknowledgement of the dangers of opting out of the larger game ecology also factors into tabletop gaming—particularly when players have established such close-knit relationships. If anything, Beyer’s analysis has a corollary: by opting out of stranger involvement, a table-top RPG group like *The Deliverers* also runs the risk of “propagating the dominant culture” because there are no outsiders to call out behaviors that have been normalized within that close-knit group. By becoming used to the toxicity present in playing ugly, members run the risk of normalizing verbal abuse because “that’s just how we play.” Indeed, while members in *The Deliverers* did stress that interpersonal problems were stressful and interfered with game enjoyment, no one mentioned ways of combating or preventing further problems. Members merely “ride it out” while never actually changing the gaming ecology which is precisely why new player recruitment is met with such reservation. So Stabile and Hollander’s final emphasis

---

159 Ibid., 26.
on the necessity for resistance in order to create new engagements is crucial. There must be resistant voices\textsuperscript{161} present to challenge the status quo.\textsuperscript{162}

\textbf{Comfort}

But another key aspect to consider, at least as it applies to an all female guild like \textit{DotH}, is that many of its members actually belong to multiple guilds whether they are all female or not. Additionally, quite a few also use the LFR feature in \textit{WoW} and do active raiding with pick up groups. Indeed, one the key reasons why \textit{DotH} has been able to maintain its gaming presence is because of its flexible membership strategy. Numerous members stressed that while \textit{DotH} is a quiet guild at the moment,\textsuperscript{163} just knowing it’s there is enough. Indeed, the most common adjective used to describe their feelings about \textit{DotH} was comfort. Riley described it as a “warm fuzzy blanket” and another described it as “comfortable.”\textsuperscript{164} Candi also stressed this comfort. “I know that I can go and level and not look at guild chat for an hour and it not being a problem or if I just want to sit and chat at guild chat, that’s fine too. So, it’s always a welcoming place, regardless of what I want to do. That’s why I always go back there.” Even in table-top gaming,

\textsuperscript{161} Stabile, “I will Own You,” 53.

\textsuperscript{162} Hollander, “I Demand More People,” 26.

\textsuperscript{163} At the time of the interviews, various members acknowledged that \textit{DotH} was “quiet” due to players’ summer schedules but specifically because \textit{WoW} was at the end of an expansion cycle. The lull in participation was expected to dissipate towards the end of 2014 since a new expansion would be available at that time. All \textit{DotH} members interviewed were looking forward to more guild involvement. Update: as of March, 2015 this is exactly what happened. Throughout the day, at least 5-12 players will be online with an increase on the weekends. Guild chat has increased, as well as raiding and group questing. New members have started to join, as well. There are new officers and a new website, as well as an added in-game Garrison feature that allows players to “visit” each other’s home bases. Overall, this new expansion has been met with enthusiasm—not only for guild cohesion, but for player participation, in general.

\textsuperscript{164} Nymph, interview by author, June 13, 2014.
comfort is described as a necessary component for group membership. All members of *The Deliverers*, for example, stressed that comfort was a primary concern and even though comfort was something that had to be present in order to join the group, the interpersonal conflicts did interfere with that comfort once the joining was complete.

Indeed, policing comfort as a result of safety was a primary concern for the majority of the participants. Policing took many forms: in *DotH*, private conversations were encouraged to stay private—if there were conflicts between members, they were not to talk in guild chat. There were also rules considering trigger warnings and members were encouraged to use discretion when dealing with sensitive topics like rape, abuse, harassment, and excessive profanity. This discretion is found at all levels of guild involvement, as well. Players who did have interpersonal conflicts were expected to take screen shots of private messages so that there was proof for the offending behavior. In *DotA*, if a guild officer does reprimand, the officer will issue a strike and send the offending player a letter. Alaina stressed that, as an officer in *DotA*, she is the one that usually gets drafted to write these letters because she is both a good writer, as well as diplomat.

This necessity for diplomacy speaks to a larger connection to intimacy, then. T.L. Taylor acknowledges that responsibility is a core binding element that ties guild members together. Individual players have a responsibility towards the guild and vice versa. Because respect is a prime tenet of *DotH/DotA* membership, fellow guild members can trust that their voices will not only be heard but also valued even when conflicts arise. As Alaina stated, “you have a reputation that you’re expected to get along with other people.” These expectations, therefore, allow for a

---

higher level of intimacy due to the trust factor involved. Players’ vulnerability in such situations is mediated by the knowledge that they will be treated fairly.

Vulnerability, in other words, is a prime reason why safety is so important for these players. Not only does guild involvement provide a buffer against this, but table-top gaming also factors vulnerability into player inclusion. For *The Deliverers*, safety and mitigation of vulnerability are tied directly to participation. Because of the nature of the taboo play that takes place within the group, coupled with the presence of a minor, great pains are taken to keep play private and free from outside scrutiny. Because there exists a potential threat to safety, or at least perceived threat, players must feel that what they say when the game is in-session will not be used against them outside of that game session whether in their careers or outside relationships.166

**Immersion**

On the surface, immersion may not seem to be a safety issue when discussing both online and table-top RPGs. After all, immersion is built into game design whether through a game developer or the storyteller. When discussing immersion in the most common sense, it’s understood to be one way in which players are able to “be” in the game—and in this way, Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle is evident. Whatever worldness is present—whether Azeroth or a setting description during a *Vampire* session, immersion allows the player to experience the game through the eyes of the character. And while immersion is a contested

---

166 Hans’s reaction to this aspect was a bit more ambivalent, though. At the beginning of the project, he stressed that he didn’t have anything to hide. I could ask him anything because no one would care, least of all him. Later, though, he did stress that since I was focusing on the playing ugly play-style of the group, it would be a good idea to change his name (he originally stated that using his real name wasn’t an issue). Members within *The Deliverers* would know who said what, but outside of the group it became a safety issue.
prerequisite for game enjoyment, it still helps players maintain a sense of being “a part of the
dream.”  

Raph Koster suggests that immersion is hardly necessary for game enjoyment, especially in
a 21st century world where gaming is consumed in chunks of sporadic time, rather than just long
hours of uninterrupted play. 168 Joshua Abboud argues that the ways in which disconnected
temporality are built into a MMORPGs affect player subjectivity—that “the subjective
potential... can be located in the temporal relationships, rather than only in the identity politics of
avatars.” 169 Both of these understandings of disjointed time illuminate an important argument
connected to immersion, although neither author discusses it directly. Players hold game design
accountable when problems with immersion happen—not just other players or themselves, in
part because of the temporal (dis)connects embedded in the game design.

The Shared Dream

The players I interviewed all stressed that the worlds created by the storytellers and by the
game designers were a particularly important reason for sticking with the game. It was
interactive storytelling and the shared play experience that kept them invested. Boredom. Lack of
between the game and the player, undermining player subjectivity. Every player interviewed


168 Ibid.

mentioned some negative quality of their gaming experience that tied directly to immersion. But there are core differences between them that relate to safety, as well.

While some of the issues that players mentioned were problematic, most players also acknowledged that those problems wouldn’t keep them from playing. For example, Roz stressed that since she plays *World of Warcraft* on a Mac, there are certain vehicle quests that she just isn’t able to do because the interface will not let her access the controls needed to complete the quest. But she also stresses that while that may be an expected albeit annoying quality of the game experience for her, it doesn’t prevent her from the RPG overall experience. Another player stressed that it was the repetitive storylines in a game that eventually drove him towards another MMO that allowed for more story variety. In fact, of the players interviewed who switched RPGs regularly, lack of game content and story were key factors that contributed to the switch.

Repetitive play is also an issue for table-top gaming. Jane stated, for example, that boredom can sabotage a game experience. If her character has nothing to do, whether due to the number of players involved in the game, or due to the lack of story arc, she would seek out other games.

---

170 Gaming on a Macintosh (Mac) computer is rife with technical problems, although this issue is getting better. It is usually understood in gaming circles that playing *World of Warcraft* on a Mac is bound to be problematic—Macs don’t have as much hardware support and most games were designed to be run in Windows. Roz’s experience with unsupported hardware is not surprising. My own bias should be apparent here. See *WoWWiki*, s.v. “World of Warcraft functionality,” last modified June 6, 2015, [http://www.wowwiki.com/World_of_Warcraft_functionality_on_Macs](http://www.wowwiki.com/World_of_Warcraft_functionality_on_Macs).


172 Topher, Akorshin, and Jack all mentioned the necessity for a good narrative in the games they played, whether online or table-top.

173 In an RPG like *D&D*, small groups are more manageable than a group of over, say 7. The more players, the more the storyteller has to tailor a campaign to accommodate each. Players are then stuck with downtime waiting turns.
or hope for the campaign to end quickly. Indeed, creating an effective campaign doesn’t always gel for everyone and immersion suffers. In *The Deliverers*, for example, one core complaint that all players had was the life cycle of a typical campaign ending too quickly. Rarely does a story ever conclude naturally, for example. While there are notable exceptions, a typical campaign lasts 1-3 months without actually concluding. We will just stop playing and start another campaign with a different story or switch games and start from the beginning of the character creation process. Some games last only one night depending on how the story manifests or number of dead characters. These abrupt switches and endings keep players from investing in the storylines and characters. Players all reminisce about that one awesome character or that one campaign that went nowhere for no reason and even though there is a hope that an old campaign will eventually get remembered and brought back, they rarely ever do. Franz described this process in terms of a life cycle: “a story has never ended on its own. It never died its own slow tragic death—it's always murdered prematurely.” This emphasis on murder is illuminating because it speaks to the ways in which these players think of the role-playing experience—at least as it exists for *The Deliverers*. As much as players would like for the campaign to take on a life of its own, ultimately it’s the DM/GM who controls the level of immersion and intimate connection to the campaign since killing it effectively limits any amount of player agency available. Since players know not to trust too much in the commitment to a specific campaign, players are able to “ride out” the negative experiences because they know it is merely a temporary state of play—it’s uncomfortable but won’t last long enough to cause any lasting damage to the strong ties between players. Immersion, therefore, is dangerous for a group like

174 Jane, interview by author, April 22, 2014.

175 Ending naturally in the sense that it is has a traditional narrative structure complete with a beginning, middle, and end.
The Deliverers. A lack of trust in the tenacity of a story keeps players from emotionally investing too much in the experience and keeps the relationships between players safe.

But another interesting thing to note about the act of reminiscing is the persistence of these memories in association with the RPG experience. Numerous players discussed their characters and specific storylines and certain gaming experiences with fondness—almost all could remember a specific gaming moment in vivid detail—not only what their character was wearing, but the people, the storylines, and the dialogue involved no matter how old the memory. When these players discussed these gaming moments, they were there and communicating that thereness was explained carefully with detail and context. For example, Ruby described an all night Portal 2\textsuperscript{176} game session she had with her boyfriend that took place in 2012 on the night a doomsday cult had predicted as The Rapture.

So we were like…we’re just going to stay up all night and we will wait for the apocalypse, and we will play this game. We stayed up and the time passed, my time zone, time passed in his time zone, we were still there. Then the sun came up in Ohio and we were finishing it. I remember it was not long after the sun came up and we beat the game. It’s like this amazing scene, where Chell gets out of the facility and she’s going out into the sunlight for the first time. She goes out and it’s bright and shining and boom. It’s over and then you get like this really neat song with all the robots and stuff. We were on the phone, and we were really tired, but we did it. It was the first actual game with a complete storyline that we played through.\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{176}Portal 2 is not an MMORPG, but rather a console puzzle-based game with a strong narrative and multiplayer game mode. See Portal 2, “About,” accessed March 23, 2015, \url{http://www.thinkwithportals.com/about.php}.

\textsuperscript{177}Ruby lives in Ohio while her boyfriend lives in California.
It’s these *uninterrupted* shared dream moments that allow for immersion and they are not just manufactured through game design. In fact, although *all* of the players with DM/GM storytelling experience stressed the shared story as a defining characteristic of RPGs, those players who didn’t have a storytelling background still emphasized the importance of a shared group experience.

Immersion-as-dream is an important concept here in another way, as well. While Koster does stress that immersion is important, he acknowledges that immersion is particularly important for a specific player *personality*. “Crazy Dreamers,” in other words, are those players who “are unmoored, and always seek out secondary worlds.”178 Indeed, Koster frames this unmooring as a particularly nostalgic harkening back to his initial *D&D* sessions and yet also acknowledges that immersion is a style of game design that must adapt to time constraints. Since immersion requires a time sink, Koster stresses that it may be falling out of fashion in order for games to reach a larger audience because “games aren’t just for crazy dreamers anymore.”179 Even though Koster frames the “crazy dreamer” as a romanticized connotation of old-school gaming that he equates with immersive reading, it is important to note his emphasis on player personality. While the majority of the players I interviewed stressed the pleasure of immersive game play, they *all* emphasized that they didn’t take the game too seriously specifically because of the negative connotations associated with immersion. If players are unable or unwilling to modulate their game behaviors, that was seen as problematic. It’s precisely this facet of immersion that ties directly to safety. For both online RPGs and for table-top gaming, investment and safety are linked to concepts of *balance*.

178 Ibid.

179 Ibid.
Time Sinks

When I interviewed Alaina about her gaming life origin story, she began with a confession. *WoW* scared her at first because her younger brother was a hardcore raider and "had no life." But eventually, she relented when her significant other asked. Roz also confessed to guilt play. Since she was unemployed, she spent far more time on *WoW* than she thought she should. So did Uulir. And Patty. And Candi. And Riley. In fact, the majority of the players interviewed who spend the majority of their gaming online in MMORPGs reacted to their time commitments disapprovingly. …and usually laughed nervously when confessing. Guilt play is like that—acknowledging the high time commitment but disavowing the negative association with addiction by admitting to the time sink allows players to still see their gaming identities as originating from them, not just something that happens to them. Disavowal, therefore, acts as a way for players to control their own player subjectivity.

Those players who were active in table-top gaming approached the time commitment differently, though. Hans, Agnes, Todd, Jane, Akorshin---all of the players with storytelling experience emphasized how much time they devoted to crafting their campaigns and took pride in the time sink. The time commitment for them was not embarrassing to admit to. For them, storytelling and creating the shared narrative required time in order for the RPG experience to have value. During the advent of one *Vampire* campaign, for example, Hans referred to the story as “his masterpiece.” It is no great surprise, then, that the majority of the storytellers had a strong background either formally or informally in creative writing. Great dedication and art are understood to be qualities to be encouraged in the storytelling process and a masterpiece cannot

180 This also relates to what Helen Thornham refers to as “geek” gaming i.e. an assumption of excessive gaming that is both emotionally and temporally excessive but is almost always associated with masculinity, or rather, a failure of masculinity. These kinds of damaging discourses are widespread within popular culture. See Thornham, *Ethnographies*, 67-72.
be a rushed endeavor.\textsuperscript{181} Even the players who participate in table-top RPGs without storytelling experience—the other members of \textit{The Deliverers}, for example, and Topher, and Jack—the time allotted for role-playing was framed as a time-expensive hobby, but not unlike other hobbies, either. Guilt play was not emphasized in relation to their own gaming habits. The majority of the players interviewed knew exactly how much they gamed per week and actively chose games where their time commitments could be accommodated, whether because of the time it took to learn the new game or because the game was considered so immersive and complex that it became a time sink. And yet, none of the players interviewed—whether those who played in MMORPGs or table-top, consider themselves addicted. Addiction, however, was a specter that hovered around \textit{other} players—usually those players who could not balance their lives outside of the game and were assumed to be the ones who caused the majority of the problems in-game.

\textbf{Serious and Too Serious Gamers}

Rules are a necessary component of the game design process both online and in table-top and can promote immersion by allowing players to trust the space created by the game world. In some ways, game narratives and game rules follow the same creation patterns as any other fiction: verisimilitude must be established in order for a participant to feel in the story and in the game. Once that suspension of disbelief gets broken, the dream does, too. So rules are not treated by the greater gaming ecology as inherently problematic since knowing the rules is the first step in mastering the game. But there are two ends of the same rules continuum that break immersion: the Rules Lawyer and The Cheater. Both are forms of gamer harassment that prevent players from full participation in the game experience.

\textsuperscript{181} Although the completion of a campaign, might be—at least within the context of \textit{The Deliverers}. 
The Rules-Lawyer is that player whose rigid interpretation of game rules prevents other players from becoming immersed in the shared narrative. The Cheater refers to the player who breaks the rules, whether through exploitation of a game feature, through modding, or through cheat codes. Both disrupt player agency and both were described by players as a negative aspect of the RPG. For example, for those who played table-top, rules were not seen as a wholly unbreakable or limiting aspect of the game. House rules, for example, allow players to actively manipulate game mechanics as well as allow for creative problem solving. In fact, because table-top gaming is considered a mutually constructed story, many of the players with DM/GM experience emphasized that knowing when to flub a rule was part of learning how to run a good campaign. In this way, rules were not meant to be seen—they should only operate in the background quietly without glaring too brightly in players’ eyes. A Cheater, therefore, eliminates the illusion and forces the player to see the strings and in so doing, prevents the player from fully participating in the story by hijacking player expectations and regards for fair play. Indeed, allowing Cheaters to operate within a game space unchecked, was seen as one reason to leave a game.\footnote{Patty framed her view on cheaters as something that unfairly affected all players because a hacker is always destined to win. It did not just affect her. This positioning of herself in relation to the rest of the gaming ecology is interesting because it emphasizes the relational quality of MMORPGs. A game-wide understanding of fairness highlights how player subjectivity is interconnected.} The same is true with the game mechanics—if the game rules are too heavy handed or flagrantly inconsistent (unfixed bugs and glitches are a prime example), immersion suffers since it forces a player out of the moment.

But suspension of rules, as long as the suspension is agreed upon by all participants, can also be a source of pleasure. Patty, for example, discussed how one of her favorite gaming moments was during a table-top gaming session during Halloween 2013.
We did a special sort of D&D and one of our friends ran it for us. It was just the Halloween special D&D. It followed no rules. There were no real game mechanics to it. We had a ridiculous sort of players. We would roll ridiculous amounts of dice. The storyline was just absurd. But it was so much fun for me to just take a break. It was sort of role-playing and dialogue. I loved it. I just thought it was such a new thing that I’d never experienced in the table-top gaming world.

So this non-serious play can also be a way to keep the RPG from becoming too bogged down in mechanics and allows players a bit more control of the game experience. But when a player takes the game too seriously, that control is lost. For many of the members of The Deliverers, for example, negative aspects of gaming are associated with players taking the game too far—whether by overemphasizing game rules to the detriment of the story, or by becoming so emotionally invested in the game, the other players become uncomfortable. For example, numerous members of The Deliverers referred to a past member\textsuperscript{183} crying during game play because his pet monkey was executed. While the event is always framed as a humorous example of player seriousness, it has also become game canon and serves as a warning for other players to not go too far in the RPG experience. Indeed, “it’s just a game” and “it’s just paper” are common expressions used to de-escalate a game night where a player’s character is killed. By framing the death as “just a game,” the player is then able to reclaim a level of agency by disavowing an

\textsuperscript{183} There was a falling out with a male player prior to my daughter and Patty joining. While the player had extensive knowledge of D&D rules and could be seen as an asset in a game where game mechanics is a crucial component, when running an RPG that emphasizes role-playing more than game mechanics, like Vampire, the player’s encyclopedic knowledge of the rules was not only a heated source of contention, but actually a detriment to the game experience. Ula, for example, stressed that this might be one reason why she has no desire to actually read the handbooks—becoming too versed in the rules becomes an indicator of taking the game too seriously. This is the same player who clashed with Jack, as discussed earlier.
anticipated emotional response. Which in turn, keeps the storyteller in check because if the player acknowledges “it’s just paper,” the power dynamic shifts away from DM (who is sometimes referred to as God) back towards the player.

For members of DotH, being too serious is one assumption made about those gamers outside of the guild who bully and harass and it’s this level of “too serious” that allows for a guild like DotH to exist as a safe zone for female gamers. Safety, in other words, is tied to immersion when players are no longer able to be trusted to balance their level of seriousness about the game.

**Bleed/Play**

Bleed is a phenomenon where “it’s just paper” doesn’t work as a de-escalation tool. Sara Lynn Bowman describes bleed as a “crossing over” of boundaries, in this case boundaries referring to an out-of-game life affecting the in-game play.\(^{184}\) It’s when a player brings their emotional baggage to the game and “infects” the game but also vice versa. Bleed-in, for example, refers to “real” life affecting the story. Bleed-out refers to the story affecting real life. Nathan Hook argues that the existence of bleed proves that Huizinga’s magic circle is, indeed, permeable.\(^{185}\) William J. White et al argue, instead, that bleed shows why immersion should be considered a contested concept in general—bleed shows not only that the magic circle is

---


permeable, but there are multiple methods of crossing that boundary threshold. In both cases, bleed does not have to be considered a negative effect—as Bowman states, it could be a natural consequence of immersion.

Indeed, bleed could be seen as one of the reasons why players enjoy role-playing—purging emotional baggage through enactment can be a cathartic way of creative problem solving. And it isn’t always enjoyable. Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen explore bleed play as it exists in Nordic role-playing communities and stresses that this type of play-style is closely related to theater and psychodrama. In applying Aaron Smuts’s rich experience theory to bleed games, they argue that players find deep emotional value in these role-playing experiences, as long as the performance is rendered safe for all participants. Safety is a crucial aspect, then. For example, Annika Waern describes players falling in love with romancible characters from the single-player based fantasy RPG, *Dragon Age*. Because Bioware designed the romance options into game design (and encourages the immersion that comes with the romancing options), some players have been able to construct “safe-zone romances” in which they can explore relationships that would otherwise be inaccessible.

---


189 Ibid., 22-25.

words, can be connected to identity play, whether explorative or projected. And for the storyteller to not bring in their own emotional (and professional) baggage into the creation of a RPG campaign ignores one of the most basic tenets of being a storyteller—write what you know.

But players did report on the negative effects of bleed, too. Agnes, for example, stressed that the stalker who targeted her, did so because he took Werewolf too far. In this case, bleed-out became an issue of safety. Bleed-in was also reported quite often, and Uulir’s discussion of a death threat as a reaction to her gaming-while-female, clearly indicated to her that the harasser had issues with women in general and that she was merely a place holder for that misogyny. When framing bleed as a safety issue, it is necessary to also acknowledge that for the majority of the players interviewed, bleed was not the motivating factor to quit a game. It was only when bleed jumped to the person’s personal life outside of the game that it became a deal breaker. For example, when Uulir discussed the death threat she received, she acknowledged that it was disturbing, but since the person had no way of actually finding out where she lived or knowing her real name, she dismissed the threat as irrelevant and just another example of gaming-while-female. In fact, she also stressed that she was glad it happened to her and not another female who may have gotten spooked by the level of hatred directed towards her. Because she was confident in her safety, she was able to process the threat in a way that allowed her to continue with her game life. Ruby echoed this same point. “It’s like people think that they can get away with whatever online. But if it ever bled into my offline world, that would probably be it for me.”

So overall, bleed might be one facet of immersion that allows a player to take the game experience too far. But if the player can trust that the bleed can remain compartmentalized, participation is not necessarily impeded. In any case, safety and immersion rely on trust in order

191 Ibid., 252.
to be effective. A player must be able to trust the game, trust fellow players to play fair and not hijack the game experience, trust the boundary between the in-game and out-of-game behavior, and trust the story. By doing so, trust allows for a more intimate play experience that can keep players invested in their gaming group and in the game itself. But if that trust is violated, players must leave if they are to maintain any form of control over their player status.\textsuperscript{192}

In this chapter, I argue that trust and intimacy are tied closely to issues of safety, immersion, and even game design. While this chapter focuses more on the negative associations connected to immersion, in the next chapter I will revisit immersion as it relates to presence. Intimacy achieved through presence is deeply connected to technology use, spatial use, and narrative use. All of these aspects allow for a deeper immersion, as well.

\textsuperscript{192} In reference to the beginning journal entry, so while Patty’s absence was met with confusion, it was her only course of action if she was to maintain a level of gaming agency.
CHAPTER THREE. IF WE’RE ACTUALLY PLAYING TOGETHER-TOGETHER:
INTIMACY THROUGH PRESENCE

“It’s killing me...not going to lie...” and Patty says it with a broad smile and she slowly shakes her head while she says it. Like she cannot believe how intense the statement is. We are at a local coffee place. I haven’t seen her since the blow up, although the texts we’ve been sending each other have helped smooth out any awkwardness. The place is empty, at least.

“I’m not playing anything. No more EQ and now no D&D. A little Call of Duty, but I miss RPGs. We play co-op on CoD but it’s not the same. You miss all of the story...” and so we talk. About work, about her new boyfriend, about school. Everything but the blowup. Until we do.

“He’s been texting me. Here, see?” and Hans’s texts are sweet and suggest regret without ever stating it implicitly. That’s probably as close as it will get. “I miss you guys so much. I just...” We leave it unsaid and fixate on a hornet climbing the wall for a minute. Slow.

We tried playing without her. Hans would play Patty’s thief and we would pretend that her character was still part of The Deliverers. But it didn’t work. The character’s personality is so intertwined with her. Hans’s version of Patty’s character wasn’t Patty. He was too cold, too angry, too confrontational. And it made us miss her even more to see the difference.

So we ended that D&D campaign and switched to a new Vampire story and even though Patty isn’t in this new campaign, there are still signs everywhere—pieces of her in the dust that settle in the corners of every room. You could feel her in the absence. Everything is informed by what isn’t there. There is one less chair at the gaming table in the living room. Hans smokes alone out in the breezeway. The homemade snacks she brought every week have been replaced with cut up vegetables and nuts that go uneaten. My daughter now bakes something every week to try to fill in that void. It helps. It does.
One of the profound 21st century revisions to Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle starts with a seemingly simple question in regards to the placement of a chessboard. Where is the here of the game? The rook, the pawn, the queen…they move according to the rules of the game and here is within the confines of the board itself. In other words, the sacred spatial confines of the chessboard limit the way a player actually connects to the game. The timer dictates when, the rules dictate how, the black and white pieces indicate who, and the chessboard dictates where.

But presence is not confined to these limitations and is one core reason why the magic circle is in need of revision. Presence is situational and amorphous and is far more dependent on the player’s ability to transcend the limitations of the space reserved for play. After all, that chessboard may not be a physical object placed upon a table. It may be a computer code. It may be a phone call. Presence, in regards to the scope of this project, specifically refers to the ways in which players actively engage with the game surroundings and with each other in order to allow for a more connected intimate experience no matter if that play takes place online or through table-top. Throughout the interview process, players discussed the joys of being there—in the game moment, in the presence of other players, and simultaneously here—in their embodied experiences heightened through the use of sensual constructs and identity connections. For these players, presence is simultaneously inside and outside of game design. And this hybrid state requires a level of immediacy that speaks to the temporal constraints of intimacy.

This chapter analyzes how presence allows for intimate play as a means of keeping these players invested within the game experience and with each other. It does this by looking at the role of technology, spatial practices, and embodiment strategies, as well as the negative effects that can take place as a reaction to presence.
Technology: VoIPs and Immediacy

One distinction that should be acknowledged at this point is that while there are distinct similarities between those players who maintain their gaming lives through table-top RPGs and through MMORPGs that take place online, there are obvious differences concerning where they play. When discussing the connections between presence and technology in general, telepresence is a far more specific term to describe the ways in which online players use technology to foster intimacy. Cheryl Campanella Bracken describes telepresence as a state of denial of the literal presence of a mediating technology in order to “feel a sense of connection with the mediated content.” Telepresence “is felt by media users when the technology becomes transparent in the interaction.”¹⁹³ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter call this denial the “disappearance of technology”—a state that game designers strive for.

One of the goals of a good game design is that the user becomes completely immersed into the experience so that they are not thinking that they are interacting with a computer, they are not thinking that they are fiddling with a joystick. The technology is so seamless, the design is so seamless, that they get into the character, and they completely lose sight of their surroundings and everything. In order to convince the person that they are immersed in an experience, the technology has to be so good that it makes itself invisible.¹⁹⁴


In other words, those who play MMORPGs like *WoW* actively deny the presence of the vehicle \(^{195}\) (the headset, the keyboard, the screen, the computer program proper) in order to skip straight to the felt experience of game play and intimate connection with other players.

One key vehicle that players use to achieve telepresence is the Voice-over Internet Protocotol (VoIP). Three primary discoveries connect directly to the players who described their MMORPG experiences: VoIPs like Ventrilo and Mumble are an integral yet problematic force in their gaming lives, the game design tools featured in MMORPGs like *WoW* are crucial yet inadequate methods of preventing harassment or griefing, and these technologies can be profound components of combating isolation by bridging the geographic constraints of long distance relationships. VoIPs like Ventrilo and Mumble have changed the ways in which gamers connect with one another in MMORPGs like *WoW*. Dmitri Williams explains.

VoIP is the use of computer networks, including the global Internet, to carry a digitized voice signal. People engaging in CMC\(^{196}\) over the Internet can thus interact with one another via voice, instead of or in addition to text. VoIP is inexpensive, can connect with existing phone service, and allows for many-to-many communication. For groups that

---

\(^{195}\) The term, vehicle, is an intentional choice of words here on my part. It’s a reference to physical transportation. But it’s also an acknowledgement of the more figurative use of the term since it’s one of the two key components of a metaphor. The vehicle is the object that transports the meaning. The tenor is the intended meaning. They are mutually constitutive. The use of the term, vehicle, is also an acknowledgment of the verisimilitude that the denial of a literal presence entails—much like the appearance of reality in a novel, a denial of the game interface allows for a heightened sense of connection. One should see the story and not see the pages with print—unless the printing has typos. Jonathan Steuer describes this connection to literature, as well as a clearer sense of the dimension of telepresence and engagement. See Jonathan Steuer, “"Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence," *Journal Of Communication* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 88, [http://steinhardtapps.es.its.nyu.edu/create/courses/2015/reading/steuer.pdf](http://steinhardtapps.es.its.nyu.edu/create/courses/2015/reading/steuer.pdf).

\(^{196}\) CMC stands for computer-mediated communication.
rely on text-only communication such as game players…the move to VoIP represents a fundamental shift in the quality of that communication.\textsuperscript{197}

For an MMORPG like \textit{WoW}, which relies heavily on players working together in order to achieve team goals, VoIP heightens game play by allowing for immediacy. Because players, with the use of a headset and microphone, are able to establish game tactics quickly in real-time\textsuperscript{198} instead of typing commands during raids, these synchronous chat capabilities make raiding and grouping easier to manage. Players do emphasize that Vent and Mumble do add to the social experience—particularly during down times during raids\textsuperscript{199} or even during those guild parties in \textit{DotH}. But they allow for a deeper level of intimacy between players, as well. S. Craig Watkins acknowledges, for example, that VoIPs help players “bond more genuinely.”\textsuperscript{200} This connection to the genuine is an interesting observation for a few reasons. It takes Pettit’s analysis of “Internet people vs. real people” to task,\textsuperscript{201} but the term \textit{genuine} also implies \textit{authenticity}.


\textsuperscript{198}Real-time is instantaneous communication. See \textit{Techterms}, “Real-Time,” last modified January 8, 2007, \url{http://techterms.com/definition/realtime}.

\textsuperscript{199}Uulir.

\textsuperscript{200}S. Craig Watkins, \textit{The Young & The Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 126.

\textsuperscript{201}Pettit, “Trust, Reliance,” 120. The discussion in the last chapter of Pettit’s analysis of the lack of trust ability in purely digital environments seems to not anticipate the bridging that takes place because of VoIPs, but that shouldn’t be too surprising, either. VoIPs had only started to gain momentum in 2004 and Pettit does argue that while his analysis applied to the understanding of telepresence at the time, he suggests that future technology capabilities may change the nature of these relationships. In other words, he does offer hope for a future digital condition, while disavowing his specific digital moment.
Authentic, for the sake of this dissertation, may connect more to verisimilitude of sensual detail. Gaming is a particularly visual and aural experience. Players see the game interface. They see their characters interact with the game environment. They read the text based communications of guild chat and private whispered conversations (a visual/aural performative cue in itself\textsuperscript{202}). But aural components in MMORPGs are game design elements, too—they connect the player to the game with the use of background music (much in the way a soundtrack to a film functions), environmental atmosphere (bird calls, running water, screaming children), and non-player character (NPC) interactive conversations components. But VoIPs allow players to share in these visual and aural components through synchronous play. So even while their characters may not be playing in the same geographic zone, let alone the players’ bodies occupying the same physical space, the immediacy of a VoIP allows for a level of immersion between players and not just between the player and the game. The shared sensory experience becomes intimate through the mediation of a VoIP and even though players know those mediated components are present, they become invisible because of the player expectations associated with the performed act of denial—that “willing delusion.”\textsuperscript{203} Because players know how to get to that immersive state, i.e. they go through the mediated steps that are associated with logging into the game, logging onto Vent, and typing—and stop seeing the strings once they are there.

One reason for these more heightened bonds might be connected to that immediacy which VoIPs allow. When players are able to speak directly with one another through synchronous communication, listening to the inflection and verbal nuance (rather than merely reading text)

\textsuperscript{202} A whispered chat conversation is a one-to-one personal text based conversation between two people. “Whisper” implies privacy due to the spatial image invoked. Lips breathing quietly into an ear to signify privacy…it’s a banal aspect to the MMORPG, but invokes intimacy due to the simulated closeness.

\textsuperscript{203} Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, Digital Play, 20.
allows players to interpret conversations in a way that is more connected to face-to-face interaction and allows for a clearer understanding of the non-verbal meanings that can take place in conversations. For example, instead of relying on emoticons or text language to convey subtle or implicit subtexts, players can hear when another player is being sarcastic, or humorous, or playful—aspects of language which are more readily misinterpreted if purely communicated through text based chat. And because these conversations take place in real time, players who use VoIP are also able to place these conversations within a contextual time frame that also allows for a more immediate presence. When players communicate through Ventrilo, for example, it is common for a new player to jump on in the middle of a conversation but because it’s not possible to “rewind” the interrupted conversation (unless the conversation was recorded), the new player is forced to either state “what I miss?” or not add until context has been established. VoIPs also allow players to join more private channels that prevent other players from accessing conversations. In effect, using VoIP allows players to join conversations but only if the other players choose to get them caught up. But when VoIP isn’t used and these conversations take place via public text based communication, the temporal component is immediately lost and presence can suffer. For example, if players choose to communicate through an open text based chat channel, it is possible for a new member to jump on after the discussion has finished but because there is a record of the discussion, that new player misses the possible sarcasm, context for the discussion, and “being in the moment.” The chance of reconnecting to that intimate “being there” suffers. And even when private text based chat channels are used, there can still be misunderstandings that arise since immediacy is not always possible: if a person walks away from the computer during a private conversation, possible misunderstandings manifest from the perceived lack of participation.
Technology: VoIPs and Territoriality

But there are tradeoffs that come with an increased sociability and sense of connectedness with VoIPs, as well. Because VoIPs allow for a heightened (tele)presence,204 the “being there” aspect of presence becomes another territorial gender marker. Before this technology dominated online gaming, gender anonymity was easier to maintain because the identity of the player was assumed to default as male teenager since gamers were assumed to be that specific demographic. While Sherry Turkle’s analysis of gender-swapping in MUDs in *Life on the Screen* emphasizes that passing has always been difficult to sustain in online gaming,205 before VoIPs, there was still the ability to maintain a sense of gender anonymity in an MMO like *WoW* specifically because a good player was assumed to be the default straight white male, much as Yee’s analysis of territories suggests.206 The emphasis here is on *good*. As Thor stated in his interview, this perception of a player ability based on perceived gender was something that could be exploited, as well. When discussing his gender-swapping experiences playing a female avatar in *WoW*, he stressed that other players seemed to be more forgiving if he made mistakes or asked for advice when he was on his female character. But playing as his male Tauren warrior (which he stressed was a dead giveaway of a male “behind the keyboard”) was met with resistance when he wasn’t playing well enough or if he was asking questions.

This assumption of player ability based on gender is one reason why VoIPs can work against a player, then. For example, Candi discussed the disappointment players had when she

---

204 Telepresence and presence may not be interchangeable due to the extra steps associated with the denial of the mediating technology, but the end products are still the same. Hence, the hybrid form of (tele)presence seems appropriate.

205 Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 212.

applied for an open raid: “I applied and they needed a DPS and you could just hear people when you get on Vent and they hear your voice for the first time, Oh, it’s a girl.” And other players who raid regularly reported the same reaction. “There’s always that moment when you log in to Vent and you’re like, the second I open my mouth I’m going to find out what kind of group this is…that’s something the guys don’t have to think about, do they?” Even Thor stated that passing for him was only possible when playing with strangers or playing solo (without using a VoIP), but as soon as he joined a guild, passing was no longer a possibility—particularly if VoIPs were used.

This analysis of territory linking to hearing is a prime example of Stabile’s point about doing gender. VoIPs make gender accountability easier. Because so many MMORPG male players choose female characters (a point that Stabile emphasizes), holding players gender accountable cannot just be through character selection, (even if Thor did say that the male Tauren Warrior is usually a sign of “a male behind the keyboard’’). Hence, when Candi and Uulir discussed the immediate negative reactions other players had when their genders were confirmed through hearing their voices, their perceived weak-player-due-to-female status was used against them. Both players did stress, though, that while it was an aspect of Ventrilo they didn’t like, neither quit raids based solely on these negative reactions. As Uulir stated, accountability went both ways: she knew what kind of group she would get based on those initial reactions. But this might be one reason why players join guilds as a way of filtering out the added vulnerability that can take place when raiding with strangers (and doing gender) who communicate through VoIPs—hence, guilds like Daughters of the Horde or Alliance, remove that territorial stigma.

---

207 Uulir.

208 Stabile, “I Will Own You,” 50.
associated with playing-while-female by controlling membership and not controlling how those members communicate with one another.

And VoIPs don’t just make gender accountability easier, either. As Alan Finewod stresses, VoIPs can work against players because players become too accountable. When discussing his experience of participating in a guild committed to role-playing, Finewod explains how Ventrilo actually contributed to the demise of the guild.

Eventually I found my way to a guild that was committed to role-play. Members were encouraged to speak “in character” in the guild chat channels and to develop in-game personalities. Some of the players were successful at sustaining consistent fictional personae to the extent that when the guild set up a voice server using Ventrilo (“vent”), the contradiction between the character personality and the actual player was disconcerting. Relationships that had developed over time in the game world through role-play performance had to be re-established as expectations (chiefly of gender, age, and geography) were disrupted. In time, role-play activity decreased as “real” personalities emerged. Voice chat made some aspects of the game easier, especially in raids and team combat, but it made role-play difficult, and perhaps pointless, to maintain.²⁰⁹

Filewod’s focus on the fragility of maintaining role-play, then, emphasizes the risks that exposure can entail when a VoIP has the ability to pull back the curtain on the performance.

**Technology: VoIPs and Verifiability**

But there are other aspects to VoIP and other synchronous communication technologies that also complicate the gaming experience. While Blizzard emphasizes that game play is monitored and that harassment that takes place through chat is verboten, Blizzard rarely police chat

---

channels directly. They react to complaints rather than seek out infractions and, instead, stress that a player should use the /ignore feature in game, instead. This /ignore filters out offensive game play by allowing a player to make all comments by that offending player invisible in a conversation. But the feature does not actually prevent the behavior—it just hides it from those who choose not to see it. In effect, it allows offending behavior to dominate the space while avoiding any kind of criticism. Hence, the only ones left listening to the offending voice are like minded and perpetuate the cycle of what is considered acceptable behavior. But VoIPs like Vent and Mumble leave no record and cannot therefore be prosecutable according to Blizzard’s policies. Blizzard can only react if infractions take place through written chat. Screen grabs of harassing behaviors are also required for guilds to police behavior, too. But if a behavior cannot be documented through verifiable proof, offending players cannot be disciplined.

Technology: VoIPs and Agency

These kinds of experiences with VoIPs are therefore not just about the constant reminder of territoriality that comes with gaming. Since the use of a VoIP is not always a prerequisite for guild membership, some players have found ways to still maintain a level of agency even when VoIPs are used. Akorshin stressed, for example, that as long as guild members in his guild can hear players in Ventrilo during group quests or raids, they do not necessarily have to participate by speaking. Being able to listen to directions is enough in most cases and allows the player a level of control on how they would like to communicate. Indeed, when discussing the members in his own guild, Akorshin stated that while he thinks one of his guildies is female “in real

---

life,” no one has heard her voice in Vent no matter how long they have all known her. She communicates solely through text based chat and her guildies have respected that communication style. Patty also stressed that when she is playing *Call of Duty* on her Xbox, she doesn’t always use her mic to communicate when grouping with strangers (who therefore assume she is male) and will just listen to the conversations. “I get men on there all the time that say things like...just verbal assaults...I've gone on and put on my headphones and say, *hey you know you're talking to a female that way. I mean that's disrespectful.* So that changes their tune sometimes. Not always.” It’s Patty’s choice of participating through the mic, and choosing whether to identify herself as female that allows her a way to maintain control over her gaming presence.

And even though *DotH* does use the VoIP Mumble for raiding, the vast majority of guild communication outside of raiding but within game is still conveyed through text based guild chat—not a VoIP. Again, this might be a factor of the immediacy associated with a VoIP, but it also might be a way of fostering agency for those guild mates who do not raid regularly but still desire a communication strategy while in-game. When I log into *WoW*, for example, I do not use Mumble—I communicate with fellow guildies entirely through text based chat. It forces me to choose words carefully when interacting and I spend a lot of time erasing or refining a response before responding to a player. This isn’t possible when using a VoIP—the immediacy is there,

---

211 A very common way of differentiating the character from the player. IRL is an acknowledgement that the presence within a game is distinguished from the presence without. See *Urban Dictionary*, “IRL,” accessed March 25, 2105, [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=IRL](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=IRL).

212 But Patty’s calling out of disrespectful behavior is also a point that Stable suggests can help re-configure these kinds of territories, too. Stable, “I Will Own You,” 53.

213 Relying heavily on text based communication for this project was an obvious research strategy, as well. Because guild members communicated via text so regularly, I was able to screen shot conversations as a means of simplifying the research process. Periodically, I would
but I am far less succinct and more likely to stumble over words. Text based chat, in other words, is a safe default that players have access to at all times while in game, while VoIPs allow for access to players at any time—whether in game or out of game (as long as the player has logged onto the VoIP). Numerous players interviewed stated that they used Vent or Mumble even when they weren’t actually online playing. They would just pop into Vent to say hi or socialize. But unless they were raiding, they didn’t necessarily use it while in-game and would choose to participate through chat text, instead.

**Technology: VoIPs and Together-Together**

But there are profound ways that these kinds of communication technologies help players stay intimately connected with one another, as well. In their study of Social Presence and Closeness, Daniel Gooch and Leon Watts argue that when loved ones live apart, a shared communication experience can have a cumulative effect on the quality of the relationship and that synchronous voice and visual communications rated the highest in helping to produce both Social Presence and Closeness. Ruby’s communication strategies reflect this. Ruby’s long distance relationship with her boyfriend is mitigated by their mutual love for gaming. While neither play MMOs currently, they have maintained “a gaming life” in such a way that allows

remind guildies that I was paying attention to those conversations as a way of keeping them informed of my presence-as-researcher as well as my presence-as-fellow-player. I would also remind players, particularly after a conversation that highlighted a key theme that emerged through the interviews. By reminding fellow guild members that I found their engagements important, my desire was to show respect and acknowledgement of their gaming lives.

---


215 Ibid., 518. Gooch and Watts do stress that this study merely suggests Social Presence has an effect on Closeness—it does not prove it.
their relationship to remain intimate through communication technologies like Skype, and Bluetooth and phone. “So, technology in this regard, reliable technology is extremely important especially for us. If we’re actually playing together-together, we probably wouldn’t need internet connection or phone or any of that other stuff. To be able to use like eight different things all at the same time, that’s very important for us.”

This concept of “together-together” is interesting because it also highlights another aspect of presence: most players stressed that even when their loved ones were local, playing the game together was a key bonding strategy…and being together wasn’t dependent on a shared physical space for intimacy to take place. Thor stressed, for example, that when he plays a console game that allows for grouping (in his case, playing Borderlands\textsuperscript{216}) with his out of state cousins, it becomes “an interactive phone call” that allows their use of videogames to become “a place to catch up while we do something fun.” While he did stress that Ventrilo and Skype were ways they foster that interactivity, he also stressed that he relies on the Xbox voice communication component the majority of the time—one that Patty also discussed as a means of maintaining a controlled presence. Sherry Turkle does warn about the drawbacks associated with this focus on control, though. She argues that technology allows us so much control over how we interact with others that it can allow us “to dial down human contact, to titrate its nature and extent.”\textsuperscript{217} Turkle worries about the ways that technology allows us to spread ourselves out—that we go wide and broad with our communications, but the depth is too often missing. In return, we are left feeling


\textsuperscript{217} Sherry Turkle, ”The Tethered Self: Technology Reinvents Intimacy and Solitude,” Continuing Higher Education Review 75, (2011): 31, ERIC.
more isolated, more alone. But Turkle’s point doesn’t undermine what Gooch and Watts suggest, either. Her point isn’t that communication technologies are at fault—she merely emphasizes that we’ve gotten too used to distance. Overall, an active focus on multiple communication strategies, therefore, highlight that cumulative effect that Gooch and Watts suggest, but the synchronous aural component is a particularly important tool in order to counteract that controlled distance that Turkle fears.

**Technology: VoIPs, Game Stores, and Isolation**

One important theme that emerged within the interviewing process dealt with the active ways in which players sought out gaming communities as a means of staving off loneliness and isolation attributed to new geographic environments. For those players that sought out table-top gaming communities, the research process was simple: they went to the local game store or college campus club and found like-minded players merely by occupying the same physical gaming space. Jane, for example, started playing *D&D* alone much earlier than college, but found the experience unfulfilling. “I needed somebody else to play with. So, one of the first things I thought was I’m going to see if there’s a gaming club when I get to college because there’s clubs for everything. There just happened to be a club. It was called BASH which stood for Benovelent Adventures Strategic Headquarters. So, I immediately went there and was like, *I want to do this, somebody show me because I want to play role-playing games.* That’s when I started.” Todd found a gaming group when he moved merely by going to the local game store and sitting down at the table. When Hans moved away for college, he found a table-top gaming group by going to a local game store, as well. Jack, however, used a slightly different approach.

---

218 Ibid., 30.

219 Ibid.
When he went away to graduate school, he researched local gaming groups through internet forums. “I've walked into these people’s houses without ever having seen them before. It was kind of weird.”

Indeed, one aspect that these players emphasized was that going to a game store to find a gaming group was not nearly as beneficial as knowing members ahead of time, but participation itself, in any table-top game, sometimes trumped comfort. Jack stressed, for example, “Now, I would want a group of people who I can actually talk to outside of the game and not want to strangle myself. Because I've had that. Some people who are actually adults would be really nice, who happen to own homes. We don't have to play at the back of a comic book store.” Hans also stressed that playing with strangers met through a game store is problematic since he assumed that “bad stereotypes of gamers” are found there. “But when you have no options…you’ve got to remember this is before there was an internet, chat boards, and Facebook at all. I mean, there was no D&D hotline.”

This emphasis on “no options” stresses the importance of the experience itself—that playing in a gaming group offers the player something other than just camaraderie or community. Todd stressed this aspect specifically. “Dungeons and Dragons for me had been Prozac. It keeps me sane. If I can’t play it once a week I will probably go wild and climb a Bell tower with a high power rifle or something like that, just because I would be so frustrated.” Hans stressed this same aspect, as well. On numerous occasions playing with Hans in the last decade, he would state, I need this at some point in the night. Role-playing games offer something more than just a hobby, then. And while Todd’s response seems extreme, it does offer an insight into why playing matters to those who play—RPGs can become a means of creative problem solving.
The table-top gaming experience—whether with strangers or with friends, also allows players new to a geographic area a way to create a presence with which to mitigate the vulnerability of being alone. Because RPGS like *D&D* offer players creative outlets in which to participate in a story, and because the shared experience of storytelling allows a player to achieve intimacy, players who *have no options* in who they share that gaming experience with may try to seek out alternate methods of participation. For example, of all the players who discussed table-top gaming experiences, no one suggested that staying in an uncomfortable gaming environment was anything other than temporary. Jack eventually found other table-top gaming groups with friends and roommates. Todd not only found other table-top games to join, but also started running his own campaigns and then eventually started playing *EQ* online using Ventrilo. Hans also stressed that the process of finding players to join a group wasn’t that difficult if he was running the campaign—players eventually found him instead of him actively finding them. Jane also found a core gaming group through BASH, even when the initial participation in BASH ended and then eventually moved online in order to accommodate those players who were geographically distant. For all of these players, once the initial shock of a new geographic environment wore off and their presence in the local gaming community intensified, they were able to branch out and find groups that were more compatible with their own game styles and personalities.\(^\text{220}\)

This is a mirror of the same processes and geographies that online RPG players faced. Instead of a game store, players seek out LFRs\(^\text{221}\) in *WoW* and synchronous communication

\(^{220}\) These RPG recruitment strategies connect directly to Gary Allen Fine’s analysis, as well.

\(^{221}\) LFR refers to the Looking For Raid feature in *WoW* that was introduced in Patch 3.3.0 (it has since been replaced as of Patch 4.4 with Raid Finder feature, although LFR is still a term that players used to describe it). A player signs in to join a raid without necessarily knowing who will
technologies like VoIPs foster the same benefits as face-to-face interactions. But the relationships between players, no matter what geographic location, are still a primary reason why they play. Akorshin stated for example, “Because you’re developing friendships even though it’s not somebody you see in real life every day, we’re still communicating through Voice Over IP, through technologies where we can talk and discuss and experience together on a regular basis.”

But the mitigation of the effects of isolation was present for both table-top and MMO players, as well. For example, Uulir lives in a rural area in the “middle of a bunch of corn, cows, and llamas…but we still have decent internet.” For her, *WoW* was the primary means of connection with others—it is the only thing to do in a town that has a one screen movie theater as its sole means of entertainment. And for the majority of the other players who play exclusively online, losing those connections to other players is what would drive them away from the game. Playing together is an important component of the RPG experience for them and losing that intimacy—not toxic gaming practices, is a crucial reason why they stay. In order for them to weather the harassment in LFRs, for example, players turn to their guilds and other online gaming communities such as WoW_Ladies for a validation of their gaming presence and experience. Uulir states, for example, “If I go to my guild\(^2\) and I just start complaining about the way girls are sometimes treated in game, there’s always going to be that one guy who pipes up and goes, *it’s not that bad. You’re exaggerating.* But I can go to Wow_Ladies and I know

---

\(^2\) Uulir’s present guild is not gender exclusive.
when I say, *Man, this stupid crap is stupid*, they’re going to know exactly what I mean.” And gaming presence goes beyond just the personal gaming identity, as well. Nymph explained that *guild* presence is also important—that “we have a pretty good presence…if anything I've gotten kind of from people, *Oh, yeah, I've played with people in your guild and everyone's really nice.*” So presence isn’t just a creative solution to geographic isolation, it’s also a means in which to validate the presence of a guild within the larger gaming ecology. But the ways in which technologies foster this presence vary depending on the motivations for playing.

Overall, technology capability allows players to maintain a level of presence within these games on their own terms in spite of the difficulties presented by hostile strangers or geography. The use of these technologies, in other words, allows for a spatial bridging between a more distant *there* (on the metaphorical chessboard) and the player’s immediate *here* (the player turning on her mic to interact). But how players use that game space on both sides of that bridge are also factors in allowing for intimacy to happen, as well.

**Game Space**

Presence requires another component in order to be effective in creating and maintaining intimacy: the use of inclusive and private game *space*. The ways in which players use game space—whether in MMORPGs like *WoW* or a game store or living room or a Skype session contribute to how private the role-playing experience is for the player and in turn grounds the player in the shared experience. As explored in chapter one, the concept of a boundary echoes Huizinga’s original understanding of how the magic circle functions as a space separate from the larger reality.  

---

in nature—that is, the game environment continues to exist even when the player is not logged into the game, but it also maintains a sense of worldness. But this worldness does come at a steep price, as well. Because guild members can play in different locations within the game at any given moment, maintaining a spatial connection to one another requires careful planning that goes beyond a private chat channel reserved for guild chat. One way that DotH helps its members connect with one another’s characters is through guild parties that take place in a given location within Azeroth. For example, members suggested that taking their characters to these sanctioned in-game events that were purely social in nature, rather than geared around a raid event, actually helped connect them to the guild in a positive way. Riley stated, “[The party] was small but I mean small like there were like 13 or 14 people there. But it was the first time I actually felt at home in the guild. Nymph, the present head officer and moderator of the guild explained the logistics of such parties.

We’ll have a little party sometimes, a lot of stress to plan as it turns out. Partly it’s deciding stuff to even do especially when we want to come up with new things...worrying that people won’t show up and that sort of thing. It’s just something about getting the groups of people together and chatting and actually interacting with each other within the game. I think any sort of party that we’ve had like that, like anniversary parties, are usually pretty fun. We usually pick a location and then there will be something that might have a fun surrounding or something. We’ll get together there and we’ll set off fireworks or put down cake and

---

224 Each level of guild participation is given a specific title usually tied to length of time in the guild, responsibility threshold, and overall amount of guild reputation achieved. Each level of reputation opens up special game design perks that benefit the entire guild. New members with low social capital within the guild begin with the designation of “Devoted Minion.” Officers within the guild range from “Deputy Overlady” all the way to Nymph’s present level of “Dark Mistress.” This designation requires the highest level of responsibility in running the guild.
there will be some talking over Mumble. The girls are very quiet for some reason a lot of times. Sometimes we’ll just do little events like fashion shows, that sort of thing.

**In-Game Memorials & Parades**

There are other examples of the larger *WoW* community using game space as social space, as well. When a player dies, as figure 4 highlights, other players might organize an in-game funeral service as a way of acknowledging the effect that the missing player’s social presence had on fellow players. Much like a funeral service IRL, players gather their characters to pay their respects, create symbolic gestures (the lighting of fireworks, the casting of spells that create particular light effects, the planting of blooming flowers and trees) to honor the friend, and bond with each other over mutual grief.225

![Figure 4. Image of a Proudmoore Guild’s In-game Funeral.](image)

225 One of my earliest gaming memories in *WoW* is of a fellow guild member’s death after a long battle with illness. The fact that this player’s family member contacted a guild officer in-game to let us know speaks to the ways in which IRL and game life are arbitrary distinctions. Our shock, sadness, and confusion were real. Our feelings of helplessness and distance were mitigated slightly by *doing something*. I remember her voice had a thick iron quality like molasses. I never met her face-to-face, but Ventrilo let me know her. We used Vent for her memorial—nothing in-game. It was enough for us just to hear each other’s voices and talk about her. I don’t even remember her name anymore.

But the vulnerability of using game space in this way should also be apparent. Because these private funerals use public game space, players can only trust that those witnessing the memorial service will respect the performance. One of the most infamous examples of a violation of this implied trust, happened as a result of an in-game memorial service. Because the funeral took place on a PvP server (a player versus player game mode that is purposefully designed to allow players to kill opposing factions), *every funeral character* was attacked and killed. This event is still discussed today in gaming communities not only for the pain it caused the participants (and the flagrant disregard for social codes), but because the play space was intentionally designed for such behaviors to manifest. The guild responsible for the attack, therefore, has been simultaneously vilified and lauded.

In-game funerals are not just player generated events, though. While MMORPGs do not usually allow players to create permanent memorials that persist throughout the larger game geography, developers do construct permanent in-game memorials as a way of honoring the

---

227 If this behavior would have happened on anything other than a PvP server, this antisocial behavior would be a textbook example of griefing, but since the game-play mode regards the behavior as a legitimate PvP tactic, it isn’t a violation of Blizzard’s Harassment Policy. See *WoWWiki*, “Griefing,” last modified June 19, 2013, [http://www.wowwiki.com/Griefing](http://www.wowwiki.com/Griefing).

228 The guild also recorded the event and posted a celebratory video. Based on the way the video is edited, starting with the opening image featuring a “Women Shouldn’t Vote” tagline, there are obvious gendered components to the performance that let other players know that “intended male subject position” of Yee. See GamesraiderTylerNagata, “The WoW Funeral Raid Four Years Later,” *Gamesradar*+ (blog), March 5, 2010, [http://www.gamesradar.com/the-wow-funeral-raid-four-years-later/](http://www.gamesradar.com/the-wow-funeral-raid-four-years-later/).

229 When that fellow guild member died, I contacted the Blizzard help desk to inquire about a permanent gravestone marker in a specific geographic zone. The representative did bring up a
gaming community. Deceased game developers, players with strong community presences, and even celebrity players have specific in-game geographic spaces permanently altered in tribute.

In-game social parties can also be more political. Proudmoore Pride gay pride parades on the Proudmoore server have taken place every year for over ten years now and are designed as public participatory events. As Filewod stresses, these player-generated role-play events in *WoW* are huge tourist draws and are meant to be seen by as many players as possible, much in the same way that gay pride parades in real-life strategically occupy public spaces that disrupt the status quo. Presence, in other words, is a tool that can be used to combat invisibility.

---


233 Filewod, “Patch Notes,” 39.

This use of the game’s worldness as an intimate spatial component emphasizes how (anti)social these places can be. They are “social places with relevance…they constitute public spheres that stretch across all five planes.”\textsuperscript{235} Michael Nitsche’s reference to five planes in regards to video game spaces consist of \textbf{rule-based space} (the realm of the game coding and theory), \textbf{mediated space} (the cinematic form of presentation), \textbf{fictional space} (the realm of the imagination in shaping how the player interprets the images), \textbf{play space} (“space of the play…includes the player and the video game hardware”), and \textbf{social space} (the interactive space consisting of other players).\textsuperscript{236}

![Diagram of Michael Nitsche’s Model of the 5 Conceptual Planes of Game Space.](image)

As Nitsche emphasizes, these five planes are mutually constitutive and reinforcing. They do not exist apart from the other planes because each relies on the other. These five planes can also be applied to table-top gaming, as well as Skype \textit{D&D}, although some planes get emphasized more than others depending on the location of the play space. While \textit{The Deliverers}, for

\textsuperscript{235} Michael Nitsche, \textit{Video Game Spaces} (Cambridge: MIT Press. 2008), 235.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid, 15-16.

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid.
example, rely on the DM/GM’s living room as the site of game play, Jane has used Skype to engage with non-local *D&D* members. Instead of video game hardware being a factor in play space, the layout of the gaming table, the lighting, the dice, and even the food act as an equivalent plane. Fictional space use requires a heavier emphasis on active imagined place since table-top RPGs rely heavily on storytelling.

In the case of a long distance *D&D* group connected through Skype, the imagined space has even more emphasis on the words used to describe the story. The same is true for the social component since table-top RPGs rely on interactive elements for the game to continue. The rule-based space connects directly to *D&D* primarily through the use of the game manuals present that help clarify the rules of engagement in the game itself. Even the “cinematic” component of mediated space is available: the grid map used to plot out the setting of the game, the mood music to establish atmosphere, the minis to represent characters…all of these components work together to foster an intimate space where players feel connected to the game and each other.

According to Nitsche, the two primary forces that act as that mutually constitutive scaffolding between the planes are functionality and presentation. They “constantly interlink the different planes to bring game spaces to life.”238 Players were able to use these spaces in a way that could keep them invested in spite of outside factors that might prevent them from doing so.

**Presence, Performance, and Embodiment: “She is Absolutely Me”**

Susan Manning suggests that defining performance has shifted “from the achievement of an action to the embodiment of an identity.”239 It is important to note that performance within the

---

238 Ibid, 17.

context of RPGs and for the sake of this project is understood to be both discreet acts and discreet identities. They are embodiment strategies that offer players a way of achieving intimacy. By looking at how players create their characters—not only the physical representations of their bodies but also their backstories and personalities, it becomes clear that a player’s embodied performance within the game/story/community allows for an invested gaming presence. And it’s this presence fostered through a heightened sense of connection-through-empathy that allows for intimacy to happen.

One important aspect that players discussed in terms of why they played RPGs in the first place focused on the ways in which they positioned their role-playing choices in relation to their non-gaming lives. This relates to the ways in which the players viewed not only these types of games, but the way they also viewed themselves in relation to those games. Jane, for example, stressed that her experiences with videogames and online games were not as fun for her, in part because she had a difficult time managing movements and manipulating the controls. But a table-top RPG allowed her to participate without those barriers. The characters she created also possessed physical attributes that her own body did not possess. “Because I’m disabled and short, I always want to play tall, very dexterous people. I like playing acrobats, rangers—people who move fast and who can do tumbling. I like playing characters like that.” Franz stressed a similar desire to play games that he would not be able to do “in reality.” Because he had a lot of experience playing sports in the past and present, he only plays first person shooter (FPS) videogames or table-top role-playing games. “I can go out and play football. Why do I want to do it for pretend?” This also relates to what Roz questioned in regards to character choice selection in WoW: “I'm sorry, I just don't want to play a human. Why am I in a [fantasy] game and I want to play a human?” Connie also stressed that playing table-top fantasy RPGs allowed
her to explore an area of her life that she wasn’t able to experience, otherwise. “It’s kind of a performance thing, yeah. It allows me that creative part that you were chicken to get out on the stage and do it maybe, to do it in a small group.” Each of these examples highlights a key aspect of the player-character duality: players are able to explore aspects of their own lives by positioning their characters as the proxy for the experience.

But character construction is also influenced by the limitations of the game system’s creation process. In her analysis of teenage girls and their avatars, Connie Morrison posits that a limited avatar creation process forces a player to create temporary “autobiographic fragments” instead of avatars with fully developed and accurate identity markers. These fragments offer a view of the self that might not have been possible without the constraints presented by the computer program. This concept of the “autobiographic fragment” could be applied to the character creation process in MMORPGs like WoW or EQ, as well as within the confines of table-top games such as D&D. There are still parameters of character creation present: for RPGs like WoW, players are presented with a limited set of options for gender, race, size, and age. For table-top RPGs like D&D or Vampire, character creation is highly influenced by chance—player statistics such as strength, charisma, and appearance are at the mercy of the dice roll and the DM/GM storyline. Fantasy RPGs, in other words, still operate within certain constraints,


241 An avatar and character are not interchangeable terms, though. Where an avatar is a visual representation of the person creating it, a character is multiple and not representative. It does not take the place of the person.

242 Connie Morrison, Who Do They Think They Are? (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 68.
although game designs are constantly evolving to open future possibilities. It is how the player operates within those constraints that allow the player to become invested in that character’s personality and backstory, as well as providing a means of inspiration for creative role-play.

**Backstory and Autobiographic Fragments**

But it’s also important to note that the majority of the players interviewed also discussed *multiple* characters and *multiple* stories and how each of their characters offered a different aspect of their own personality. Topher stated, for example, that whether he played online or table-top, he always tried to connect.

I mean I’m a role player at heart in that even in the MMO, I still have at least a semi developed background for my character. The choices that I make in the game kind of flow from it. Sometimes they don’t because I’m forced into making a choice just for survivability, even though that wouldn’t happen. But I try to make sure they reflect kind of the same ethical orientations so to speak.

This focus on character motivation as a means of embodied performance is one way in which players are able to invest in their characters and the stories they inhabit. But creating a character’s background and backstory is also connected to how the player identifies with a

---

243 One fascinating possibility is the idea of designing MMORPGs that allow a player to not just work within parameters for a virtual body that evolves as it progresses through the game experience, but a virtual *mind* that also evolves. See Mirjam Eladhari and Craig A. Lindley, “Player Character Design Facilitating Emotional Depth in MMORPGs,” *DiGRA ’03 - Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up 2* (2014), www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/player-character-design.

character. Or characters. Roz, for example, is a self-described altoholic. She belongs to 23 separate guilds in *World of Warcraft* and has 70 characters (also referred to as ‘toons) spread out over multiple servers—21 of those being hunters. “My ‘toons have their own personalities. Authors talk about their characters ... I have a blood elf hunter who will only tame pets that match his hair. I did not make this up. He is just like that.” Roz keeps spread sheets to track her characters and special interest guilds. She LARPs. And each one of her characters is an autobiographic fragment of her true self: “I'm like most of my ‘toons. Like I said, my ‘toons have all these personality quirks and stuff like that. Fiona, my original. She's like, the second ‘toon I ever made. I'm shaped like a Draenai except for the tail. I'm very tall, hips, tits…She looks like me. I can really be her.” This playing with character creation, in other words, can be a powerful tool of identification.

And this identification is not limited to connecting a character to a player’s own body, either. The creation process also allows a player to experiment outside of the self. On the DotH guild site, for example, membership is not limited to female-only characters—female players can and do play as male characters and are only limited by faction (since it is a Horde faction guild). Numerous table-top players play with gender, as well. In *The Deliverers*, Hans and Franz have both played female characters at different times and all of the females in the group have played as males. Gender and sexual orientation are also possible character traits, depending on

---

245 An altoholic is a player who creates many alternate characters instead of sticking to one or two main characters. Numerous players identified with this term, as well. It’s such a widespread term, usually humorous and self-deprecating, that a popular add-on to the game was designed to manage alts (with over 92,000,000 downloads). On the main page of the addon, the addon designer states, “Hi, my name is Thaoky, and I am an altoholic.” The play on “alcoholic” (as well as the performance of the introductory phrase made famous by connection to Alcoholics Anonymous), is one way in which players are able to acknowledge while simultaneously disavow any negative social stigma. See Thaoky and pompachomp, “Altoholic,” *Curseforge*, accessed March 25, 2015, [http://wow.curseforge.com/addons/altoholic/](http://wow.curseforge.com/addons/altoholic/).
how the player envisions their personality. Indeed, in one of *The Deliverers*’ most developed *Vampire* campaigns, my daughter played a Setite\(^{246}\) dominatrix who owned a leather bar in Key West. She described her character as gender-fluid (an identity that she fought for and defended to the other players who had never heard of the term), wore all leather, and was known for being the vampire that could procure any fetish requested by visitors to the city. She named her Bo—after the succubus protagonist of the television show, *Lost Girl*. My own character was a Malkavian\(^{247}\) drag queen named, Clitha Shazam—a vampire diva driven insane by her inability to distinguish the stage from reality. I played her as a cross between Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* and Ru Paul.\(^{248}\) These characters, so far removed by our own experiences and bodies, were a way of safely exploring difference while still maintaining a sense of connection.

**Intimacy through Presence**

So the player-character body is, in effect, a reference to player-character bodies. And it’s this plurality of identity that makes these embodiments such rich sources of presence. How

---


\(^{247}\) Malkavians are nicknamed The Lunatics—every member of this clan has some psychosis that acts as a clan weakness. They also have a tendency to be the seers of the group—their mystical attributes tend to provide strange insights. They can also act as tricksters. See *The Unofficial White Wolf Wiki*, “Malkavian,” accessed March 25, 2015, [http://whitewolf.wikia.com/wiki/Malkavian_(VTM)](http://whitewolf.wikia.com/wiki/Malkavian_(VTM)).

\(^{248}\) As David Jara argues, the rules of these role-playing games, particularly in White Wolf games like *Vampire*, also influence character depth. How players interpret clan disciplines, nicknames, and explicit framing devices laid out in the character descriptions have an effect on the narrative. How my daughter and I interpreted our characters was heavily influenced from popular culture, but also by the proscribed hints of role-play explicitly stated in the game rules. See David Jara, “A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Table-top Role-playing Games,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 43, [www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue4/IJRPissue4jara.pdf](http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue4/IJRPissue4jara.pdf).
players use game space, how they create their characters, how they use technology to foster these shared experiences and stave off disconnection, and how they embody these moments all contribute to a more intimate gaming environment of their own making. No matter what constraints are present within the game, players are able to achieve presence through active and creative means. And it’s this level of agency and control over their gaming lives that allow them to derive pleasure from the gaming experience while still maintaining their player subjectivity.
CHAPTER FOUR. I’LL GO TO BAT FOR MY GUILDIES ANY DAY!: INTIMACY THROUGH SOCIALITY

We’re late. Saturday night and driving back and forth from the sitters and then waiting for the cake to cool and then traffic. It’s my birthday. And no one dies on their birthday. Those are the rules. But home life logistics have me and my daughter frazzled before we finally pull into their driveway. I can see someone grab the dog so that we don’t get trampled on. We push through to the breezeway, apologizing to Ula and Franz as we make our way to the kitchen.

And Patty jumps out from behind the refrigerator screaming SURPRISE! And it all rushes fast…gift bags on the game table, something savory on the stove. High pitched hugs and cards. And Connie has made a blue and red and white layered martini drink that we have decided to call a Bomb Pop. It’s thick and fruity and kind of disgusting and perfect but Patty hugs me and I realize every single player here is wearing a polka dot party hat. Including her new boyfriend. Ula insists it was Hans’s idea. And that it was he who bought the party hats and candles.

And tonight, we are running Patty’s first Vampire campaign and it feels like a present. In the other room, Hans and Ula explain to me quietly—her boyfriend isn’t actually a student at the school. Even if he is in the police academy on campus, it’s not directly affiliated with us so it’s safe for him to be here. So we all pretend that the last few months didn’t happen. It’s weird. But we’ll adjust. The food, the alcohol, the references to popping GM/DM cherries…it all helps.

When we’re finally ready to play, we sit at the game table and she asks Hans to put on Carmina Barana O Fortuna to set the scene. He sits down in the seat to the left of her, but Patty is sitting in the over padded seat where the GM/DM sits. Tonight it’s hers. “We are in 18th century St. Petersburg,” she says. “And the Prince of the city has requested your presence.” And she wears the party hat the entire night.
My teenage daughter has participated within *The Deliverers* for over two years, now. These players have guided her gaming development through various avenues: by showing her how *not* to behave, by allowing her a safety net to role-play complicated characters, and by proving to her that our healthy gaming lives are fraught with messy social borders. Our relationships are borderline dysfunctional, borderline enabling, and outright offensive, but they have helped shape a kind of gaming resiliency in her that might not have happened otherwise. We have tested the boundaries of our own parent-child relationship, as well. Numerous times throughout the last few years, I have wondered if I wasn’t a bad parent—a horrible mother, by exposing her to such ugly play. What kind of a parent allows her teenager to bear witness to fictional pedophiles, rapists, and genocide? What kind of a player merely glares at the DM as she watches her daughter’s horrifically disfigured character actively choose to have sex with a trickster god in exchange for beauty? What am I teaching her when I speak and when I don’t? Does it change the effect if she talks about her choices in the car on the way home?

But…

She joined a gaming club at her school this year. She is now participating in her own campaign with five other male and female classmates after school on Wednesdays. They made plans for an all-day *D&D* session for the next scheduled Teacher Work Day, but it got cancelled since not all of the parents were comfortable with a mixed-gender group taking over a basement without parental supervision. It’s difficult to explain why my initial response to the event was positive. Instead of seeing her gaming group as a possible threat, my daughter and I saw it as the

---

Ula questioned this observation. While she perceived this as a critical response to *their* behaviors, it was more of a reference to my daughter’s sometimes disrespectful behavior.
next evolutionary step in her actively creating a gaming identity. But it is understandable why hesitation exists, too. RPGs can promote intimacy through the social bonds between players and it’s that sociality that very well might need to be interrogated. How players interact as a means of improving their skill sets, fostering support networks, and establishing/maintaining gamer identities are tied to the contours of intimate RPG sociality.

**Learning to Fail**

When I asked interviewed players how they learned to play their RPGs of choice, I expected them to focus on visual learning. After all, MMORPGs like *WoW* and *EQ* are primarily visual texts—the computer interface is a crucial aspect of maintaining immersion and presence and there are numerous online research sites specifically designed to help players understand quests and improve their game play by focusing on explaining game builds that improve skill sets. And in table-top RPGs like *D&D* and *Vampire*, reading the handbooks and referring to character sheets are also an important visual means of learning combat strategies and how to role-play different types of characters. Indeed, players did mention websites and reading as key ways of learning—in fact, quite a few players who discussed MMORPGs stressed their use of

---

250 She, of course, didn’t frame it in such terms. As she stated when the event was cancelled, “It just would have been fun to play that long.”

251 While hesitation in the specific case refers to the parents feeling uncomfortable with unsupervised mixed-gender role-playing, hesitation is insufficient to explain the scope on a broader societal scale. While there are issues of propriety (all of these young people attend a private Catholic high school that places heavy emphasis on traditional gender roles and abstinence), there are possible issues of safety, as well.

But another method also manifested through the interviewing process. As Franz put it, you learn game strategy “by getting killed.” Failing, in other words, was part of the learning process. And failing was tied to not just learning how to play the game, but how to play with others.

The focus on learning by doing (or rather, by learning what not to do), offers one way of analyzing why intimacy happens through sociality. Because players know that in order to get better at a certain skill set they have to practice, they use multiple processes in order for that to happen—but learning what not to do is a valuable first step in that process. For some online players, that meant knowing what kinds of guilds to avoid based on past experiences: don’t join a guild that sends out mass invites, don’t stay in a guild that belittles its members in raids, and don’t stay if there aren’t at least one or two members that you can talk to about how well your day is going. For other table-top players, particularly those with storytelling backgrounds or DM/GM experience, knowing when to let go of the story to accommodate players is also a skill that can only be learned through experience. For Jane, that meant building a more organic story—one that stresses narrative flexibility and player directed storylines rather than adherence to a rigid plot. For Hans, that meant building more subplots i.e. “narratives within narratives.”

Agnes also mentioned this necessity for malleability and improvisation. For all three, learning

---

253 Patty also mentioned her subscription to gaming magazines such as IGN—an online and offline gaming resource that prides itself on targeting “everything that guys enjoy.” The website markets itself specifically as a male-centered sphere, targeting males 18-34. See “About Us,” IGN Entertainment, accessed April 3, 2015, http://corp.ign.com/about.

254 Topher.

255 Akorshin.

256 Candi.
how to trust the story and trust the players was tied directly to trusting their own abilities to convey that experience.

But their storytelling abilities were also tied to their play experiences—including negative ones. Jane stressed that learning how to behave in a table-top campaign is part of it. That learning what not to say is just as important as learning the rules. For example, Jane discussed how she learned quickly never to tell a GM that she was bored because the storyteller then put her character through a “special” story. But in spite of a comic-yet-stressful role-playing event that came about as a direct effect of her evaluation, she stressed that it was also the first time she realized how important role-playing was to the gaming experience. Until that time, D&D for her had been mostly “hack and slash”—all combat, no story. Being bored, in this case, led to a deepening commitment to the role-playing experience.

Numerous table-top players emphasized that learning how to interact with the DM/GM and with other players was an aspect of role-playing that only came with experience and game knowledge. Hans, for example, stressed that when he first started playing Vampire (as opposed to running his own story), he was disappointed because the GM wasn’t differentiating between RPGs: “it was like D&D with vampires. When I started reading the [Vampire] rule books, I realized that this game really, not only did not have to be run that way, it really wasn’t designed to be run that way.” And it was only when he started running his own campaign did he realize the potential for an interactive experience. Todd stressed a similar understanding of the trial and error process, but in his case, playing was tied to mastery. “I didn’t really consider it true playing until we got to the level, where we could truly read and comprehend, and interpret, and debate whether or not what we were doing was what was meant to, required to be done with as far as our interpretation of books and everything.” Jack also stressed that even though he had taught
himself how to play *D&D* by reading the manuals, the game didn’t actually start for him until he was at the gaming table. That was when the game shifted to something other than abstract. For many of these players, the trial and error process of learning was tied to how they saw themselves as a part of that game. Playing well required going beyond the reading process. But it also required the social component in order for mastery to happen.

But that social component is also tied to another aspect of the trial and error process. Todd actually hinted at this aspect when discussing the difference between learning the game and playing the game. Before he felt comfortable participating as a player, he stressed that him and his friends, while learning those rules, were just screwing around. That for him, that wasn’t actually playing the game. But it is important to note that he emphasized the role his friends played with this learning process. The learning process is vastly different when those friends aren’t there to mitigate vulnerability.

**Mitigation of Vulnerability**

When players discussed their initial experiences with the RPGs that they play, the majority stressed that they felt lost or confused at the beginning depending on how much exposure to RPGs they had beforehand. Being a “noob” or “baby” was a disconcerting position to be in when just starting out—particularly for those with no previous experience. In the ethnographic study of male players in an Animutation subculture, Lori Kendall stresses that the low social status that comes with being a novice is often reinforced through the ways in which players talk to each other—novices are overtly deferential while experienced high-status participants have the ability to control participation and the status of those in a lower social strata.²⁵⁷ These same issues of

status tied to experience are present in MMORPGs. For most members of DotH, exposure to
WoW was through friends and loved ones who played without the vulnerability associated with a
broadcasted low-status position to a broader gaming public. Their initial experiences, therefore,
were rendered safe because of those other players showing them how to navigate and how to
play the game. Roz stressed that if it hadn’t been for her friends showing her how to play the
game, she probably would not have stuck with WoW. Candi, Darci, and Riley stressed that they
started playing because their WoW-playing spouses and best friends encouraged them to do so.
Indeed, the majority of the players interviewed joined games initially through contact with
others—whether family or friends wanting that vector of sociality.

One interesting side note is that those veteran table-top players258 who started playing
around 12, did not refer to this learning process as particularly stressful or anxiety producing.
Because the other children they played with at the time were all learning the game together, there
were no unequal power dynamics—when all players were equally inexperienced, the learning
process itself became part of the sociality.259 But the majority of the players who started playing
RPGs later in life, all discussed initial discomfort of not knowing the game. That initial feeling of
helplessness was mitigated through contacts with other players, but one key component of that
contact was the acceptance of vulnerability. Players had to feel comfortable being vulnerable and

258 In this case, players with at least 20 years of experience.

259 My daughter’s experiences with table-top RPGs reflect this. Her behavior while
participating in The Deliverers is quite reserved. She is fairly quiet and more likely to follow
other players’ directions rather than take the initiative. But when discussing her participation in
her high school group, she is far more animated and extroverted. Just listening to her talk about
how confused everyone is in her group and how that confusion leads to comic failures leads me
to believe that she is far more willing to show vulnerability with others at her own gaming level.
Since everyone in her school gaming group is a novice, failing together is actually a way of
promoting a stronger bond between them.
that comfort was, in part, connected to how other players treated them during the learning process. Agnes, for example, stressed that when she first started DMing, she found the experience terrifying. “I remember showing up, and they had all their characters ready and they had my story ready. They had it written down like several pages of notes. They asked me a question, and I had no idea what they were talking about. Then they were like, *is it before or after the war of blah blah*. And I’m like, *I have no idea. Let’s start playing the game*. But they took my word for it.” Connie’s own experiences learning table-top gaming also involved a certain level of anxiety brought about by her lack of early exposure. Since she is a relatively new player, she stressed that it was her lack of gaming background that she finds most challenging because she sees her lack of experience affecting her confidence in playing. For her, experience means not having to use the books for guidance. She relies, instead, on the rest of the group to help her through the learning process, as well as copious note taking. Indeed, Connie has acknowledged that she approaches learning these RPGs—whether D&D or *Vampire*, in the same way that she approached college. She stresses, for example, that she has always been a great student and that approaching role-playing in that way helps her through the learning process.

Ula discussed her transition to a more confident player, as well. Once she started to understand the rules, she was more open to making decisions instead of just following what others were doing. This transition happened before her membership in *The Deliverers*. It’s important to also acknowledge that Ula’s early experiences with role-playing were a direct result of watching her husband DM/GM. Ula acknowledged that for a long time, she only sat at the periphery of the gaming group. “I didn’t like making any decisions, because it was mostly guys

---

260 Connie’s diligent note taking is an endearing aspect of her play-style that the rest of *The Deliverers* have come to rely on as a way of keeping track of the story.
at that point I think. They all knew the game so well that I figured whatever, like when Hans would ask, *okay individually what are your characters doing, and you can’t talk to anyone else or get any advice.* I didn’t want to say anything, because I thought I would act wrong, or incorrectly and others would be upset with my incompetence.” Once *The Deliverers* came into existence, she felt more comfortable with her creative thinking and allowed herself to be more assertive.

But one key difference between her earlier gaming experiences and her involvement with *The Deliverers* also involves the people she gamed with. For years, she watched Hans’s campaigns at the house without participating because it felt like an intrusion for her. “I mean that felt like a boy’s club to me. There was no way I was going to get near it.” But after another female player joined, she felt more comfortable. By the time *The Deliverers* came into existence, the group was not only predominantly female, but also people she is closest to. “I don’t know if it’s a gender thing or not. I mean I adore everybody. You know what I mean? They’re the people that I love most in the world.” For her, role-playing is tied so closely to the social component that she stated that without the group, she wouldn’t seek out an alternative—that it’s who is participating, rather than the game itself. It’s this emphasis on strong ties between players that helped influence the way that she values the role-playing experience.262

---

261 I joined one of Hans’s *Vampire* campaigns back in the early 2000s. It was at this point when Ula started playing, as well. For years, Ula and I were the only two females playing. Once Connie, Patty, and my daughter joined *The Deliverers*, the group was predominantly female.

262 As a side note, there has been a gradual shift in the player relationships in *The Deliverers* outside of the game, as well. While some of these players have been playing together for at least 20 years, these friendships have been exclusively gaming friendships. Franz and Hans, for example, have both stressed numerous times that while they have been playing together for over twenty years almost continuously, their relationship has been almost exclusively gaming related. While both did stress their fantasy football league involvement, they did not socialize outside of a gaming context in general. The same is true for the rest of the group—I rarely socialized.
But trial and error sans the social component also has an effect. For numerous online players, learning their game was tied to a trial and error period that they experienced alone. Uulir stressed, for example, that “it really depends on your end goals in the game. If you’re just in it to quest and get a few achievements, obviously you know it’s more of a trial by error kind of thing. I work on that kind of stuff alone if I’ve got a scenario or something I’m working on.” In some ways, this mirrors the points that Todd and Thor acknowledged about screwing around versus real game play. Since Uulir spends a lot of time raiding, her differentiation between something she is working on solo is a different tactic than when she is in a raid group (which could be with 10-20+ players). “I depend on the raid leader to know his shit and know what’s really important for each individual role… While I’ll do my homework, I expect them to be able to bring everything together in a kind of cohesiveness.” So “knowing your shit” for her is an expectation that she expects of herself and for other players.

Candi mentioned this same expectation of player responsibility. For her, knowing how to play the game isn’t just a matter of reading the forums or “riding coattails,”—players have to independently work at getting their skill sets better in a way that suits their play-style. For her, that means solo practice. “Yeah, because I am such a math nerd, I mean will sit at the Target Dummy\(^{263}\) and run DPS\(^{264}\) that’s like 2 minutes and then switch out a trinket and then run DPS outside of a gaming context with Patty, Ula or Connie before last year. But within the last year, there has been a gradual bleed through that has taken place. Couples have started socializing outside of a gaming context. We’ve gone to concerts, lectures, and movies together. We’ve house sat, dog sat, and babysat. We’ve gone on vacation together. This shift seems to have started when The Deliverers shifted from predominantly male to female. Both Hans and Franz stated in their interviews that the shift in the game has turned more social since they are now gaming with mostly women. But neither acknowledged that the social component also shifted outside of the game.

\(^{263}\)Candi is referring to the training target dummies found in capital cities in WoW. In WoW, permanent target dummies are set up in the main cities of the game and are designed for players
for 2 minutes. I don’t just say, okay this was my DPS. I look back and what changed and stuff like that.” Learning how to play her character well, in other words, requires an understanding of her own abilities in relation to game capabilities. Because her RPG allows her in-game methods of learning-through-failure, she is able to hone those skills before she is expected to play with others.

Networking, Race, and Invisibility

But although some players were able to mitigate vulnerability by gaining confidence in their play ability—whether through grouping with friends or through soloing, it is important to note that they do not play these games entirely removed from a broader support network, either—particularly when those support networks are located online. WoW_Ladies is a prime example of the extended social network that is in place to help players.

As stated earlier in this dissertation, WoW_Ladies is constructed as a safe space for gamers to discuss WoW with heavily codified moderation policies in order to promote inclusion. It’s also to practice their skills without interference from other players or game mechanics. Target dummies are similar to baseball batting cages—a player can practice techniques and test-run equipment to see how well it works. Because there are numerous items that a character can wear that affect how well a character performs, using the training dummies to track damage output helps a player get better at the game. Target dummies can also be created as consumable items outside of the cities and are used in battle to draw the attention of monsters. See WoWWiki, “Training dummy,” s.v. last modified November 15, 2011, http://www.wowwiki.com/Training_dummy and WoWWiki, “Target Dummy,” s.v. June 11, 2010, http://www.wowwiki.com/Target_Dummy.

Damage Per Second (DPS). A high DPS will help a player kill a mob faster. A mob is anything in the game that can be killed. On a PvP server, a mob can be anything attacking the player including another player. In a PvE environment, it’s anything other than other players. See WoWWiki, “Damage per second,” last modified December 5, 2014, http://www.wowwiki.com/Damage_per_second.

But another social networking blog, Nerdy-But-Flirty, focuses not only on RPGs but other aspects of “nerd culture,” including cosplay, comics, and fashion and it’s this site that acknowledges a mostly unmentioned aspect of this dissertation so far: the default identity of a gamer isn’t just assumed to be a heteronormative male subject position, it’s a \textit{white} subject position. Kurosune, a contributor at Nerdy-But-Flirty, a SuicideGirl,\footnote{Alexander Hinkley, “SuicideGirl gamer of the week: Kurosune Suicide,”*Examiner.com*, October 9, 2012, http://www.examiner.com/article/suicidegirl-gamer-of-the-week-kurosune-suicide.} and a self-identified gamer, acknowledges that it’s this assumption of subject position that she finds so frustrating, “Black girl gamers exist. We do. We’re waiting and accepting any and all challengers. I won’t even sugarcoat it: it’s bad enough being a female, and having your ‘gamer’ nature challenged. It’s worse when you have someone say to your face, ‘Yeah, but you’re black. You’re not a REAL gamer.’”\footnote{Jacqueline Cottrell, “‘Wow, I Didn’t Know Black Girls Play Video Games!’”*Nerdy-But-Flirty* (blog), February 19, 2013, http://nerdybutflirty.com/2013/02/19/wow-i-didnt-know-black-girls-play-video-games/.}

Adrienne Shaw emphasizes that racial marginalization of self-identified gamers isn’t going to change with additional minority representation within game design, and it won’t change by merely acknowledging that other consumer markets exist, either. Instead, she argues for an intersectional approach to gamer identity, one that “exists in relation to, but is not determined by, other identities like gender, race, and sexuality.”\footnote{Adrienne Shaw, "Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity," *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (February 2012): 31.} Shaw argues that instead of separating players into distinct gamer markets (which merely increases marginalization), “normalizing video games for...
all audiences, finding ways to emphasize their ‘everydayness’ in contemporary media culture, is a more productive approach to demands for representation.”

All of the players I interviewed self-identified as white, really-white, pale, or Caucasian, but beyond answering a brief demographic question, players did not mention race through the course of their interviews. And race is rarely ever mentioned in guild chat in DotH. And while the anti-oppression policy at WoW_Ladies and the guild rules for DotH strictly police racist behaviors, race as an embodied identity usually goes unvoiced. And when race is mentioned in WoW, there is always a sense of defensiveness by other players present. For example, on a public WoW forum, when a player asked about WoW player racial demographics, the question was met with a mix of hostility and dismissal, although some players did self-identify, mention Mister T, or remember that-one-guild-member-awhile-ago-who-played. On a WoW_Ladies forum discussion, when a member asked if their characters’ races resembled their players’ races, typical answers focused on height, weight, breast size, and hair color. Very few focused directly on the

---

269 Ibid., 40.

270 At the beginning of an interview, I would ask what boxes they would check mark on a census form. This question did seem to cause a bit of nervousness for most of the players interviewed. I did get the impression that asking a player to describe themselves in this way made them feel self-conscious and almost apologetic. When it was a face-to-face interview, players would also preface their answers with “Well, as you can see, I am…”


272 Mister T was in WoW marketing campaigns designed to showcase famous WoW players. He was also featured in-game. See WoWWiki, “Night Elf Mohawk,” last modified February 25, 2014, http://www.wowwiki.com/Night_Elf_Mohawk.

skin color of their character’s race. Indeed, one of the glaring points made throughout the forum post was that understandings of race in *WoW* were tied not only to essentialized appearances (short Gnomes, stout Dwarves), but to the performance of gender (“booblicious,” long hair in braids, no dresses), and class (short martial artist in RL so rogue gnome in-game, “I like animals” translates to Night Elf hunter). So while Daniels does acknowledge that “people actively seek out online spaces that affirm and solidify social identities along axes of race, gender, and sexuality,” WoW_Ladies might also be inadvertently conflating these axes since the game design encourages such identifications.

In game studies, there have been numerous discussions concerning race in RPGs. While some research focuses on racial representations within games like *WoW* and emphasize the essentialist elements at work, others have focused on the ways in which these essentialized components unknowingly mirror RL racial understandings. While others argue that these racist behaviors may not even be consciously realized, and have to be actively changed

---


275 Jessie Daniels, "RETHINKING CYBERFEMINISM(S): RACE, GENDER, AND EMBODIMENT," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1/2 (Summer 2009): 110.


through explicit acknowledgement. Theorists have also focused on the intersections of game design and ideology. For example, Lisa Nakamura argues that the Chinese gold farmer gets positioned as an enemy of “legitimate” *World of Warcraft* players (and therefore made a target of abuse) due to their perceived behavior, rather than racist ideologies causing the abuse. And if this assumption does get challenged, it’s the one who acknowledges the racism that is at fault. As Nakamura states, “[r]acism is not the result of an individual’s bad behavior, but rather the result of the person who identifies it, for they are the ones who ‘see’ race.” Indeed, one of the responses to that *World of Warcraft* forum post on racial demographics accused the poster of racism just by asking the question. As Nakamura stresses, it’s a neoliberal color-blindness that’s at work here. As Grillo and Wildeman argue, this tactical denial of race is used to control a center-stage presence—a center-stage that is occupied by a white subject position. “When people who are not regarded as entitled to the center move into it, however briefly, they are viewed as usurpers. One reaction of the group temporarily deprived of the center is to make sure that nothing remains for the perceived usurpers to be in the center of.”

---


282 Ibid.

It is tempting to see this as a similar response tactic used by forum participants when gender gets raised. In the earlier discussion of a female-only guild request, the requester gets framed as sexist by self-identifying as a female gamer. The assumption being, that a real gamer wouldn’t feel the need to draw attention to gender or race and the player is, therefore, responsible for their own harassment. This analogy is problematic, though. As Grillo and Wildman argue, “analogies offer protection of the traditional center.”284 As one of the WoW forum participants stated, “Do you ever read something so stupid that you don't have any actual reaction to it? That's what this thread is to me.”285 Because the question of race is evaluated as “stupid,” that white subject position is rendered safe and race does not have to be acknowledged. By making an analogy between a gendered forum response and a racialized forum response, I run the risk of perpetuating that white subject position by minimizing the impact that race has “rendering it an insignificant phenomenon.”286 Paasonen argues that this is why self-reflexivity is so important when cyberfeminists analyze difference. Without self-reflexivity, it can “produce a ‘doubletalk’ in which diversity and multiplicity are emphasized without questioning the normative position of white (perhaps middle-class, perhaps heterosexual) Western women as the key agents of (cyber)feminism.”287

It’s this doubletalk that can lead to invisibility, much like the color-blindness of neoliberalism. Jackson explores these intersections in her study of imagined social spaces of London women. In her analysis of Mirza, Jackson argues that “despite the imagined

284Ibid., 401.

285 Ibid.

286 Ibid.

287Susanna Paasonen, "Revisiting cyberfeminism," *Communications: The European Journal Of Communication Research* 36, no. 3 (September 2011): 344.
communities of sociality, without these safe spaces of affirmation it is not always possible for
minoritised groups and individuals to recognize themselves, and marginalized groups such as
Black and minority ethnic women can become rendered invisible.”288 Hence, in response to
Kurosune’s article discussing her marginalized status as a Black female gamer, numerous
comments focused on thanking her for acknowledging not only her spatial presence in gaming,
but also giving permission for other voices to speak up, as well. Indeed, numerous comments
focused on agreeing with her acknowledgement of casual racism, but they also used the
comment space as a recruitment tactic for their own gaming groups.289 These extended social
networks, therefore, are crucial components in connecting players outside of their player
identities, then.

**Broken Builds and Prefab Failure**

But failure, vulnerability, and sociality don’t always lead to a positive understanding of
character skill, either. Sometimes, the acknowledgement leads to quitting the game entirely.
Franz and Jane, for example, both stressed that they don’t often play online games specifically
because of a rigid learning process. Franz, for example, admitted that even though he enjoys
playing console games like *Halo*290 every once in a while, he can only tolerate about 12 minutes
a week playing. “After I get killed seven times going to the same door, to hell with it. I throw the

---


289 Ibid.

290 *Halo* is a first person shooter with non-persistent game play. There is an online
multiplayer component that does allow players to access online game matches with other players.
See *Halo Nation*, “Multiplayer,” last modified June 3, 2015,
http://halo.wikia.com/wiki/Multiplayer.
controller and I'll be gone.” Jane’s experiences with online playing had a similar result. “I don’t have the embarrassment of having an incredibly powerful samurai soldier just going, wham! Because I can’t figure out how to get through the door.” These two examples illustrate a key component here: both players prefer table-top role-playing not only because of the required social element involved with a successful outcome, but the manufactured nature of online games limits their ability to fully participate due to the fixed play built into the game design. Fixed play, in this sense, refers to the linear nature of the game design—in order to succeed, the player must jump through predetermined hoops in order to proceed. This fixed path approach, therefore, can work against the player if the required game strategy cannot be resolved. For these players, table-top gaming did allow for a more non fixed approach.291

But this issue of game design limiting a player’s desire to improve through failure isn’t limited to those who prefer table-top over MMORPGs. Indeed, many players who participate in online RPGs stressed that a “broken” character class can affect their game play. Topher stressed, for example, that he experiments heavily with character builds specifically because he likes unusual builds that require a certain level of finessing in order for the build to succeed. When discussing his love of active tanking, for example, he stressed that he builds his characters with unusual abilities specifically because it keeps him more invested in the game play. “I just connect with it better in some cases, because of that, and because it lets me play weirdly.” Playing weird, in this case, does echo Candi’s emphasis on not wanting to play a build that is just

---

291 Bartle, *Designing Worlds*, 254. Richard A. Bartle describes virtual worlds that are not fixed as containing reactive and emergent storylines dependent on player actions. It is important to note that *Halo* and other first person shooters are not considered virtual worlds, though. Because the world is not persistent, the game play ends the minute the player logs off. But the idea of a game being fixed by virtue of its non-changing, non-emergent storyline does help explain why a rigidly linear game-play style can cause a player to quit.
a “spec of the month.” In both cases, the emphasis is on building a character with unusual qualities that let them have an active involvement with the way that character operates in that world. But as Topher stressed, game updates can have a negative effect on that gameplay. “It was ultimately kind of broken because the update broke the skills I was relying on, as you know game updates tend to.” A broken class, in other words, forces an online player to modify their playing but not through failure—when the game designer is the one modifying game play capabilities, learning-by-failing becomes moot and other factors of sociality take over.293

**Chance**

Learning-through-failure requires a lot of “wipes” in order to figure out how to complete a task. Wiping, in both table-top and MMORPGs, refers specifically to all characters dying during the game battle. When a group wipes, a group dies, and the fight either needs to be reset (particularly in MMORPGs) or the players reroll new characters with a new story (in table-top).294 In both cases, wiping is part of the game experience and highly connected to chance. And chance is a matter of dice rolling and game design algorithms—not just player ability.

---

292 This is a reference to “nerfing”—this is a well-known player complaint in gaming. When a game update makes changes to a class ability, it’s usually done as a means of promoting a more balanced class compared to other classes. But nerfing is almost always met with derision by players since there is a perception that nerfing weakens a character class to a breaking point. See Dan Fortier, “MMOWTF: Nerfronomicon,” last modified June 15, 2007, [http://www.mmorpg.com/showFeature.cfm/loadFeature/1284/Nerfronomicon.html](http://www.mmorpg.com/showFeature.cfm/loadFeature/1284/Nerfronomicon.html).

293 But players did stress that even though nerfing “sucks,” this aspect of the game experience was something in general that could be weathered. As Uulir stressed, a broken class isn’t what would break her—it was the community that would do that, instead.

294 Bartle, *Designing Worlds*, 415. Bartle refers to never-to-return death as permanent death (PD). Since most virtual game worlds including *WoW* and *EQ* do not have PD, the term is more appropriate in table-top games.
When designing a character, dice rolls determine how strong a character’s attributes can be—particularly in table-top gaming. In *D&D*, for example, the first step in character design is deciding which ability score goes where.\(^{295}\) Depending on how high a player rolls, the character’s abilities change. While players do choose where to put those scores, the level of chance can determine character selection. In online RPGs such as *WoW* or *EQ*, players only design the appearance of the character once the player decides on the class and race desired. Character starting abilities are programmed into the actual game design so that players are removed from this part of the character generation process, although players can select a class tied to a specific racial trait.\(^{296}\) While character creation in table-top is at the mercy of the randomness associated with the dice roll, that random element is removed from online.

But in both online and table-top RPGs, the element of chance is particularly important in regards to combat. A player’s skill set and ability score, coupled with knowing how to play that character effectively in a group (or solo) combat scenario are important factors when going into a boss fight. But game designers program boss fights along random-number generators (within a certain parameter) which can affect damage resistance and damage output. It’s not a given, in other words, that a strong group will automatically defeat a boss encounter. Bartle stresses that

\(^{295}\)Monte Cook, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams, *Dungeons & Dragons Player’s Handbook: Core Rulebook I* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2000), 4. Depending on the nature of the story, these abilities could be incorporated into the role-playing storyline. It depends on what elements of the DM/GM’s story are emphasized. If it’s a heavy role-playing campaign, an unbalanced ability could be comical. If it’s a heavy hack and slash campaign, the characters would probably wipe quickly if abilities are too unbalanced.

incredibly bad luck can also be present\textsuperscript{297} and that players acknowledge that sometimes fights do not end with a desired outcome no matter how well prepared they are going into it. Jane stated that it was precisely this aspect that defined RPGs for her. “There has to be some dice or some method of making things happen randomly because life is like that. There has to be some kind of element of chance… if there’s not any kind of random thing, then it’s just group storytelling and it’s not the same thing.” But it’s precisely this aspect of chance that allows players to keep staying motivated, as well. Even though that meme, for example, stressed the constant do-overs are necessary to complete a boss fight, it’s the allowance for chance—that “incredibly bad luck” that keeps the event from being an example of “insanity.” As Harviainen argues, “as long as a player does not have a clear task at hand, or all of the details of a quest available beforehand, engaging surprises can be encountered. This, however, requires that the uncertainty, too, is made meaningful.”\textsuperscript{298} Because it’s out of the player’s hands, learning-by-failing can also encompass learning this very lesson and come to terms with the random as part of the learning process, as well as the pleasure process.

\textbf{Alone Together}

When discussing their experiences, players describe their gaming groups as close-knit, awesome, long-term, special, dear, and family oriented. They described strong bonds and community and drama. Players stressed that the relationships that they have fostered in their

\textsuperscript{297}Bartle, \textit{Designing Worlds}, 417. While Bartle does stress that gamers accuse live team game designers of rigging the random-number generators often (which he refers to as “mundane conspiracy-theory claptrap”), he also emphasizes that players will blame themselves or bad luck when a virtual world kills their characters. But if PD is a result of other players involvement i.e. Player Killers (PKs) who unfairly stack the deck, it becomes a matter of consent.

gaming groups are important even with the dysfunctions that families provide. Indeed, Diane J Schiano argues that although the “lonely gamer” stereotype still exists, games like WoW actually enhance relationships inside and outside of the game, whether through romantic relationships, friendships that started outside of the game and migrated in and vice versa. But one seemingly obvious distinction between playing online and table-top RPGs is the ways in which players interact with one another within that gaming environment. For table-top gaming, players need other players in order for the game to exist and thrive. But as much as online players emphasized the role of their guilds and regarded other players as family, they did not always play together in order for them to enjoy the game or maintain their community presence. In fact, one major theme that became apparent is that players were alone together.

One complaint that Patty had about her MMO, EQ, was that it emphasized group participation at the detriment of solo play. For her, solo play was an enjoyable method that didn’t require other players in order for her to be able to complete a given quest. As she emphasized, “maybe some people aren’t as socially capable of interacting with everybody and finding people to join them to complete a mission…you should be able to do it by yourself if you so choose.”

While some members of DotH did suggest that one reason why the guild was “quiet” right now, was in anticipation of the new expansion, solo play is still a popular method of game involvement. But even when players did play solo, they still used guild chat regularly, participated in Facebook conversations, and posted to the LiveJournal account. So even though

---


300 The new game expansion will be coming out in mid-November 2014. The interviews took place over the summer of 2014. All members interviewed in DotH believed that more players would begin surfacing closer to the November. At the time of this writing, this is exactly what has happened. In the summer, there were usually no more than 5 guild members on regularly. As of this writing, there are 10-20 members playing on average.
players emphasized the importance of the guild participation, they weren’t necessarily playing together.

But solo play isn’t playing alone and it’s this kind of sociality that helps these players stay connected to one another and the game. Nicolas Ducheneaut et al argue that the social aspect of *Wow* (and by extension other MMOs like *EQ*) doesn’t actually take place until players have leveled past a certain threshold. Before level 50, most players choose to solo (or play solable classes) but it’s only after level 50 where players require grouping in order to complete tasks. Ducheneaut argues that it’s this sociality along with *Wow*’s communication tools (like guild chat) built into the game that allows for an emphasis on social presence.\(^{301}\) But there is another component of this sociality that needs to be addressed, as well. Numerous players mentioned that just knowing their guild was there for them kept them participating in the game. Their friendships inside of the game did not require group play in order for it to exist. Much in the same way that players emphasized family as a key characteristic, just knowing that they could always go back to the guild or knowing that there was a place for them in the guild was enough. So while Ducheneaut emphasizes that most players “play surrounded by others instead of playing with them,”\(^{302}\) there should be far more emphasis on the comfort associated with the strong ties between these players that allows for play to happen. While Ducheneaut’s emphasis


\(^{302}\)Ibid., 4.
on surrounded play is significant, it doesn’t go far enough to address those social factors outside of the game that influence these players inside. It isn’t just game design, in other words.

**Mentoring**

Edward M. Sims argues that “life-like, interactive digital characters, serving as mentors and role-playing actors, have been shown to significantly improve learner motivation and retention.” In *WoW* and other MMORPGs, there are NPCs found in-game that can mentor, as well as act as group members during combat or are designed to aid a player through a specific quest. But these in-game digital characters have limited (albeit usually humorous) use and even Sims points out that while the creation of a virtual human mentor does have practical uses in learning, he also acknowledges that there are significant barriers, too.

---

303 Ducheneaut does argue that guild involvement does complicate this notion of playing alone together, but their emphasis is more on the persistence of guild membership and churn rate. Overall, the emphasis is on the role of spectacle, audience, and social presence as key motivators for the game. But it does not address the unique problems that marginalized players face within the larger gaming ecology and how guild memberships like *DotH* offer their members additional security.


308 Ibid., 76.
Whether or not the economic and technical barriers can be eventually overcome, mentoring in a role-playing game is predominantly a live human affair, rather than merely life-like game design. But, game design can also work against players if they do not have a social component to help mitigate the vulnerability associated with learning-by-failing. Numerous *World of Warcraft* players discussed the negative effects of learning to raid with raid leaders who belittled players unfamiliar with the game strategy. Because certain raids require prerequisite skill and gear levels in order to be effective, a strong raid leader can help mitigate tensions that might arise for inexperienced (or weakly equipped) players. Akorshin, for example, ended up leaving a guild after raiding with a belligerent raid leader (who he thought was 14). “That just goes to show you when you have a bad leader or a bad educator, then the experience is going to be bad all around. Because it could have been a lot better had someone actually tried to teach rather than assume we all know something.” Topher also emphasized the necessity of an understanding raid group in *Guild Wars 2* (the MMORPG that he plays). “So I will join in guild dungeon runs, and just make sure that everyone knows that I have never done a speed run of this before. I don’t know the strategy. You’re going to have to tell me a good, a minute in advance if we have to do something weird. I only do dungeon runs with a couple of people for that reason.” Darci also described a negative raid leader. “He was horrible. He was a nice enough guy outside of raids but when it came to actual raiding it was like Jekyll and Hyde. He became this horrible person and he would scream at you and he would make you think that the whole wipe was your fault even though you had told him that this was your first time raiding. That more than anything led me to *DotH* and

---

309 Ibid., 89.

310 Akorshin described the raid leader’s behavior as rude and inconsiderate although he did emphasize that he didn’t want to call it bullying. He did stress that he got the other player kicked out of the guild because of the event.
DotA.” These negative experiences help clarify why sociality is so important when learning these games—learning-by-failing won’t be effective if the person doesn’t trust the teacher. And that teacher most definitely needs to be a real human, rather than life-like if that trust is to exist.

Appropriate mentoring styles, in other words, are a key reason why these players stick with their social groups. As Darci stressed, joining DotH helped mitigate the discomfort of learning new game strategies. “I love the way that raids are handled. You get exasperated and tired and punchy and you want to yell and scream but you don't feel violent.” Candi also stressed the difference between past raid experiences and DotH. “After being in hardcore raiding guild where your raid leader is screaming at you and screaming at everyone. It’s nice to just relax.” In fact, most interviewed players associated with DotH and DotA emphasized this laid back, relaxed approach to raiding and group play, even if raiding didn’t fit their play-style. And while some players did raid regularly using the LFR feature in WoW (and therefore raided with strangers), they did stress that the raid mentoring that takes place in DotH is a conscious guild practice specifically designed to be a positive approach. On the DotH website, for example, there are rules for raiding and membership. In both areas, respect for the player and respect for the team are encouraged.

We will not force a player to choose a particular spec. That said, if we believe there is a way to improve a member's DPS or healing methods, a raid leader may take the time to have that discussion with you. These conversations are not a condemnation of a player's skill, but part of the process of improving together as a team. No one is beyond learning and

---

311Riley confessed to not enjoying raiding since she found it to be too stressful even with DotH’s casual stance on raiding. She also stressed that since DotH is not a hardcore raiding guild, those players who do want that type of play regularly don’t usually stay too long in the guild. The churn rate in DotH is almost always related to this aspect, rather than interpersonal conflict.
development, and if we are all receptive to these discussions, it will benefit our own gameplay as well as the success of the raid as a whole.\textsuperscript{312}

This emphasis on suggestion is an important characteristic to this guild. Players are not told how to play, when to play, how often, or with whom. While all of the rules present on the website do help explain the expectations to new members, these rules more often than not go unvoiced unless a problem arises. For guild members, mentoring and learning the game are tied to how well the player is able to communicate with the others in the guild.

But there are some distinctions that need to be clarified, as well. Numerous players stressed that they did not have formal mentors while learning their games of choice. They learned the game on their own by reading the handbooks, analyzing the online forums, and by watching the posted YouTube videos. They played solo until they understood their character’s abilities. They used LFR to gain raid experience and relied on pick up groups (PUGs) to do group quests. They played alone together. More often than not, these were the players who saw themselves as the mentors for the players who came after them and chose to pass their mastery on to new players. For example, Candi described her mentoring experience in \textit{DotH} as a focus on positive attributes.

\textit{Daughters of the Horde} has always been really big on not making anyone feel bad about not meeting minimums or whatever like that. If there was a problem, they would always say, is there anyone who knows this class, can you help? I would literally have them hit the Target Dummy and watch what they were doing. Then I played to their strength. Are they good at

moving out of things and just bad at their rotation? I mean, as soon as they see improvement, they’re happy then they want to work harder. So that makes me happy too.\footnote{Franz also stressed this emphasis on the positive when discussing how he teaches his own children. “It doesn’t matter if it's sports or gaming or history or language, I'll tell them what to do, not what not to do.”}

Franz also stressed this emphasis on the positive when discussing how he teaches his own children. “It doesn’t matter if it's sports or gaming or history or language, I'll tell them what to do, not what not to do.”

Indeed, when players discussed their past experiences with mentors and coaches—even as far back as their elementary school experiences with sports, these players emphasized their best coaches were the ones that encouraged them to succeed rather than through negative reinforcement. Hans, for example, stressed that the negative coaches in his life stuck out more because they only focused on the negative. But the best coaches treated the game as an overriding philosophy—not just technique.\footnote{Indeed, when players discussed their past experiences with mentors and coaches—even as far back as their elementary school experiences with sports, these players emphasized their best coaches were the ones that encouraged them to succeed rather than through negative reinforcement. Hans, for example, stressed that the negative coaches in his life stuck out more because they only focused on the negative. But the best coaches treated the game as an overriding philosophy—not just technique.} Uulir also mentioned the influence of a sports coach in her pre-gaming life, but instead of focusing on an overall philosophy, she described horrible coaches who ignored bullying or told her she couldn’t perform because of her gender.\footnote{Uulir also mentioned the influence of a sports coach in her pre-gaming life, but instead of focusing on an overall philosophy, she described horrible coaches who ignored bullying or told her she couldn’t perform because of her gender.}

The best coaches for her, were those that treated all of the players equally and with respect. Connie agreed with this, as well. Because she is a relatively new player, the rest of \textit{The Deliverers} have begun mentoring her. For her, these experiences are similar to the ways in which her favorite sports coaches behaved. She described the mentoring/coaching process as “guiding me—here it is. I want you to still find the answers out yourself. I'm not going to tell you

\footnote{Candi also discussed her background in teacher education, as well. She uses the same process of teaching to strengths and focusing on the positive.}

\footnote{Hans framed the philosophy as something that a competitive boy understood—that winning felt good.}

\footnote{Uulir reached an orange belt in karate and was told by her sensei that he wouldn’t let her demonstrate moves to the rest of the class in spite of her having the highest belt level in the class because she was a girl and he didn’t want her getting hurt. She quit karate soon after.}
everything, you need to explore it yourself.”

Ruby also described an early swim coach experience where the coach dismissed her swimming abilities in spite of witnessing her swim style success. Again, the emphasis on giving the players the tools to make their own decisions highlights how a good mentoring experience is connected to allowing the player to find their own way of achieving the goal.

But not every player had exposure to coaches. Some stressed that they avoided organized sports due to disability or their own perceived nerdiness. But all of the players, both online and table-top, did express an understanding of how exposure to mentors influenced the way that they managed their present game of choice—whether through learning the game through exposure to a mentor or by becoming a mentor to other players. When players did have that earlier exposure to a coach, they did acknowledge that echo in their present game style. Uulir made a direct connection between those earlier coaches and raid experiences.

It’s pretty much a direct parallel from kids’ soccer games. It sounds ridiculous but for gymnastics I had those coaches who didn’t give a crap and if you sucked, they didn’t really care. If you did well, they didn’t care. Those are those raid leaders who come in and they blow through everything if they don’t care about that person on the lowest end of the DPS who is basically AFK their way through the raid.

Caring, in this case, is a primary motivation for keeping the relationship between a mentor and a mentee positive.

---

316 Connie is also a special education high school teacher.

317 Ruby has a disability that affects her legs. While free style swimming, she incorporated a fly kick that actually improved her swim time extensively. When Ruby showed her coach, her coach made her perform the style again because she couldn’t believe she was capable of swimming competitively. Ruby discussed this event as really frustrating for her because she felt discounted as a person.
Anchors and Advocates

When I asked Candi to describe a memorable game experience, she focused on an interview process in her last raiding guild where she was the acting representative for a specific class. It stood out because the guild leader stood up for her when an applicant questioned her ability because of her gender.

This guy when he started he’s like, *I’m going to be able to beat you blah blah blah.* The guild leader Z he’s like, *Dude you don’t need to be an asshole. She’s probably better than you. So either shut up and answer her questions or the interview is over.* So that was good. That really stands out to me. It was nice to have someone finally stick up for you. Because you’re a girl you have to work really hard to get there. But once you’re there it’s so nice.318

This sticking up for a player is a recurring theme present in guild chat in *DotH*, as well. And in table-top gaming. In fact, advocacy is a primary way in which these players have been able to weather internal and external strife. And when they don’t have an advocate, it’s easier for a player to quit outright. Patty’s departure from *The Deliverers* is a prime example of this. At the time of the argument, *The Deliverers* was made up of players connected not only to the larger group through friendship, but to each other. Connie and Franz, Hans and Ula, me and my daughter, and Patty. While her friendships with the rest of us were technically unaffected, she didn’t have an anchor that tied her to the group in the same way that the rest of us had. Ula could never quit the group because her husband was the DM/GM. Franz would never quit because Connie is there. I could not quit because my daughter is involved. But when Patty’s new boyfriend was allowed access to the group, she rejoined. Having that advocate, in other words,

318 Candi is in multiple guilds including *DotH*. Since she does like to do hardcore raiding, participating in multiple guilds allows for a wider social net.
keeps players more connected to the game specifically because of those strong ties and the
ability to reinforce those ties along intimate boundaries.

It’s intimacy, in other words, that becomes the core effect of this kind of sociality between
players. Because the way these relationships allow for vulnerability to happen, because sociality
allows for positive reinforcement, because failing and succeeding are intimately connected to
how players see themselves in relation to others…all of these social components help players
improve and feel safe in the process. But these processes are also socially situated and they are
hardly utopian in nature. In spite of this, intimacy allows players to transcend new player statuses
and evolve into fully realized players more comfortable with accepting their strengths and
limitations.

These previous chapters have focused on boundaries, trust, bleed, safety, immersion,
presence, sociality—so many different themes and tools that players use to achieve intimacy.
But, so far, this project has focused primarily on player communities that function because of
those elements. The next chapter focuses on the effects of having those elements removed after
strong ties have already been established. As the next chapter’s emphasis on autoethnographic
narrative will show, once these tools of intimacy are suspended and temporarily unavailable, the
community becomes far more vulnerable to rupture, but is still capable of weathering adversity.
CHAPTER FIVE. FRAGILE PYTHONS: FALLOUT AND PLAYING UGLY

On Sign Posts and Manuals

This chapter requires patience and trust. Not only in form, but in function, as well. This dissertation is about fantasy RPGs. But not really. It’s about the people who play them. Not as an identified marketing demographic, not even as an identified research subject, really. It’s about how 20 participants envision their gaming lives and their relationships. 21, actually. I’m in here, too. Probably more than I should be.

So how best can I explain these messy, fragmented-yet-whole, gaming lives? How can I convey slipped boundaries and ruptured magic circles and the permeability of role-playing borders? How do I analyze the complicated effects of bleed and playing ugly but still maintain some level of protection for all 21 of us?

I don’t. I can only show it. But that doesn’t mean I cannot provide a manual, either.

Begin with establishing the spaces covered in this dissertation. This chapter emphasizes two main research sites: a living room where The Deliverers play ugly and online in WoW filtered through the guild space belonging to DotH. Each game space gets its own page space and its own self-reflexive italicized moment. The three asterisk breaks signify spatial/narrative boundaries. Focus on the way time shifts between play spaces. The narrative is not completely linear—each play space follows its own temporal trajectory. Notice the point of view shifts. Acknowledge the unreliable narrator. Friendship means I cannot be entirely trusted, so I also inject qualifiers—the imagined voices of those friends who own the story as much as I do. My vantage point is limited and infected by bleed. That is the point. Once the narrative has concluded, I step out of the too-close walls of role-play and define and contextualize and try to rationalize why this approach is necessary to a project so wrapped up in methods of intimacy. Good luck.
6:00 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s House, Northwest Ohio, U.S.

Your daughter has a date tonight, so you’re flying solo at the weekly game. She made cookies for them, though, and you try to walk smoothly through the breezeway in order to get to their kitchen. The dog is having none of it. You instinctively bring your knee up across your body to block this massive pitbull/mastiff and you almost drop the plate and your purse. This house, the walls are so narrow and you have to squeeze past this slobbering beast lunging for the food.

You shouldn’t be here. You know you’re not ready to act properly yet. Last week, it was a quick game of D&D, not Vampire. Barely any role-playing involved. Just hack and slash, so it was fine. You can turn your brain off with that. Only Patty and her boyfriend, you and your daughter, and Hans and Ula, then. But now? Everyone. Except your daughter. You are alone tonight and you know just how this will go. It’s not their fault.

The bleed from outside follows you through the breezeway.

***

11:00 p.m. Stitche’s Garrison, Frostfire Ridge, Draenor, WoW

Guild Message of the Day: Come hang out with us at daughtersofthehorde.enjin.com!
Welcome to Patch 6.0.3!
Please be sure to reset your UI and update any AddOns.
For more information, please visit: http://battle.net/support.
Changed Channel: [1. General – Garrison]
Changed Channel: [2. LocalDefense – Garrison]
Changed Channel: [3. LookingForGroup]
[Stitche] has come online.

The interface flips through its automatic steps and disappears. In this space, it’s just you and your ‘toon. Your own private world.
6:30 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s House

It’s too soon, you think. Maybe a few more weeks to process your mother’s funeral. Maybe get to the point where you don’t automatically mist up if someone asks you how you are doing. It’s getting worse rather than better, though. But Hans made you a martini and you are sitting in your spot on the far left corner of their leather couch and you try not to take up too much space because Connie and Franz are on the couch, too. Connie wears the cool owl jewelry and the on trend sweater. Damn, she is good. But Franz is wearing that t-shirt. The one with the arrow pointing down: “It’s Not Going to Suck Itself.” It’s fun to play the asshole and we all play along and roll our eyes in mock disgust. And it is mocking, isn’t it? Don’t even pretend you are above this. You were the one that got matching t-shirts for you and Hans that one time. Remember? “Asshole” for him and “Asshole with Tits” for you? We are all offensive. Because it is safe here.

The funeral was two weeks ago and most of these people attended. Franz and Connie. Ula and Hans. They were there. Ula made two vats of ziti. When Connie’s mother died a few months ago, you didn’t go to her funeral because you didn’t think Connie would notice. So many excuses—you would have had to bring the squirrely eight year old, you would have had to drive to Findlay and you know you would have gotten lost. But, really? Who are you to think your presence matters? Who are you to witness someone else’s grief and think anything you say will help? That’s why you really didn’t go. And yet. She went to your mother’s funeral and you realize that you fucked up and when you see Connie and Franz on the couch, your stomach burns with guilt—for being a horrible daughter, a horrible friend. They all texted you that night when you were at the wake at your aunt’s house. They all still played Vampire that night, but they texted you. We miss you! We love you!!! These people, they matter.
But you can’t be here tonight by yourself. Your daughter has been pulling away from the group. Not because she doesn’t love it here, but because she is developing a life outside of this. She wants her space, not yours. Ula and Patty text her, though. They keep her here. But you? You’re not here. You’re there. In the hospital room. You were supposed to call your mom that night and you decided to call her in the morning instead. She went into a coma, instead. You are wicked.

Patty recaps. They accomplished so much when you were gone. They had ended that night with the group stepping through a portal to 1984, New York City. Tonight…we step out into an alley just in time to hear screaming. Bauhaus is playing on Hans’s iPod. “Bela Lugosi’s Dead…”

Mentoring processes require trust. The allowance of vulnerability. The music sets the stage, lifts the curtain. Tonight’s performance will strive for intimacy but there are too many tiny cuts in the fabric. Too much collapse of the inside from the outside. It’s not their fault.

***

11:01 p.m. WoW

[ Guild ] [ Riley ]: o/

[ Guild ] [ Stitche ]: he he. Hi, there

You’re calming down just going through these motions. You take Stitche to your tailor garrison building and collect Sorcerous Air and Hexweave cloth from the Orc weaver woman NPC. You want to craft that Elekk Plushie and it requires so so many mats. 100 Hexweave and 10 Sorcerous Earth. But tailors don’t drop earth—they drop air or water and it takes hours to craft just one Hexweave but you’ve gotten through that. It’s just the earth that’s the bitch. And the trader’s exchange rate is ridiculous. 25 Primal Spirits for one Sorcerous Earth? You only have enough to exchange for one. So you go to the Auction House and check to see if you can buy Sorcerous Earth from other players. It’s just a stupid tailor-crafted battle pet. It doesn’t even
do anything. But the Elekk Plushie unlocks two pet battle achievements and YOU WANT IT. Gah, the cheapest price is really high. You can only buy two. You spend all of your gold on battle pets and Sumptuous Fur to make the Hexweave because you are too lazy to go out and farm the damn shit yourself.

[Guild] [Stitch]: um, where does Sorcerous Earth drop? I need a bunch of it to make the Elekk Plushie and I cannot find any anywhere

[Guild] [F***]: you need a lw or bs or one set up in your garrison.

[Guild] [Stitch]: I don’t have a leatherworker or blacksmith. Just a tailor and salvager in the garrison. Grrrrr.

Even this grinding is pleasant. Since Stitch is a shadow priest, you can solo her pretty well. But not for elite stuff. Not that you worry about that. Her gear score is fine for what you use her for. You don’t raid or group or do dungeon crawls much. It’s easier to just solo her. You jump on and off so often, it’s better to not commit to a group quest. Less obligation that way. But the guild presence is still here. It’s always here.

[Guild] [F***]: boom, check your mail.

F*** is a guildie. You don’t know if you interviewed her or not—so many of these ladies pop between ‘toons you don’t know which one is which. But you know this character’s personality and you assume it’s really the player’s. DotH doesn’t role-play like that. Guild chat is for the real self, not the character. F***’s chat voice is direct, and blunt and sometimes prickly in conversation. But you don’t want conversation right now, anyway. You take Stitch to the mailbox set up next to a garrison building. F*** sent you nine Sorcerous Earths.

[Guild] [Stitch]: Gasp! You frakking rock!!!

[Guild] [F***]: I have tons from my lw. Yw.
She could have made a lot of gold in the Auction House if she would have sold these instead of sending them to Stitche. You click on your tailoring icon. You open up your recipe list and you craft.

[Guild] [Stitche]: Woot!!!!!! [Elekk Plushie].

[Guild] [F****]: :)

[Guild] [Riley]: Awwww wtg!

You take the pet for a test run and battle against the seagull that perches near your fishing shack.

[Guild] [Stitche]: OMG IT SQUEEKS!

[Guild] [Riley]: ikr? :)

There is work involved in this sociality. Steps to consider. Without the face to face, without the eye contact, you have to work harder to achieve that intimacy. Or at least follow a different script to compensate.

***

7:00 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s House

“You hear screaming coming from above you, and suddenly a figure jumps out from the third story up and drops down to the ground with a woman in his arms. She has bloody puncture wounds on her throat and she’s screaming. There’s something off about this, though. The way he moved, it seemed puppet-like. And what you can see of the woman, she doesn’t seem right either. What do you do?” Patty asks us.

“I watch and listen,” I say. I am a Gangrel. I can turn into mist, and pop claws like Wolverine, and spy, and turn into a bat and a wolf, and speak 18th century Russian fluently. When you imagine her, you see a feral hippie. I have this weird ability to scry by sifting through the entrails of animals I have killed. In 18th century Russia, I lived in a forest and ran with the
wolves and wore flowers in my long, messy, hair. I smelled of pine needles and dirt and was friends with vampire royalty. They put up with the smell because we were all Kindred. And Kindred were rare where we were from. But I cannot speak English and New York City in 1984 is a baffling nightmare to me.

*God you need this tonight. This is the fun part of role-playing for you. The necessary part. It’s what you and Hans agree on the most. The need for being someone else for just a little bit. The backstory, the motivation. The chance to become something else for a while and see through another set of responsibilities and purposes. The immersion lets you layer realities without denying any of them. You two are so alike. Hans is a mirror of you. You know this. He does, too.*

“I contact my broker and get all of my money sent over,” Dominik says. His movements are exaggerated. You have seen video clips of Mussolini swaggering at podiums during his speeches. His character is holding himself in the same way. His face makes every gesture too wide. Too slow. As if he wants the audience in the back row to see every facial muscle. Hans is playing Dominik as a dictator and your stomach burns bright.

The rest of the group, Connie/Heinrich, Patty’s boyfriend/Don, and Franz/Gertrude, agree. We watch the spectacle and do not engage.

“and…CUT!” Patty yells.

The woman with the bleeding neck stands and two other people hiding in the shadows run up to her adjusting her makeup and hair. The “vampire” lights a cigarette. We watch this unfold and we try to separate what we know of this world and what are characters would know.

Cigarettes? Never. A vampire would have to make a willpower check to just touch the lighter let alone inhale hot smoke. And what does “cut” mean to 18th century Russian vampires? It would be gibberish. And how would Dominik have a broker or money in a city centuries removed from
We do all of this mental juggling without thinking, of course. We straddle the story and our lives and they bleed so so much.

Metagaming. Trust. The power dynamics are shifting, fragmenting. Intimacies depend on transparency. Require it. The surface tension of a soap bubble. In the light it’s lovely when it’s whole. It’s you, though. Not them. Not Hans. You are seeing problems where they don’t exist because you are in desperate need of a victim tonight. You need to victimize. Punish.

***

11:15 p.m. WoW

[Guild] [H***]: Okay, so quick story time

[Guild] [Riley]: Do I want to know? xD

[Guild] [H***]: I’m telling you anyway. >_> haha (it’s not bad)

[Guild] [M***]: I want to know!

[Guild] [Riley]: LOL

[Guild] [Riley]: Okay XD

[Guild] [H***]: So, I started reading wow_ladies pretty shortly after I started playing Blingtron 4000 completed.

Received item: [Blingtron 4000 Gift Package].

Maaster seems a little tipsy from the [Glass of Eversong Wine].

You receive loot: [Super Heated Oil] x24.

You receive loot: [Vermilion Onyx].

[Guild] [H***]: And there were a lot of posts that talked about getting ganked. So I assumed ALL servers were PVP servers

[Guild] [H***]: First time, I saw an alliance near Scarlet Monastery and ran the hell away

[Guild] [M***]: LOL!!

[Guild] [Mah]: Awww

[Guild] [Riley]: Bahahahaha

[Guild] [H***]: Second time, saw the boat in Ratchet and was like ooh, where does this go?

[Guild] [Riley]: d’awww

[Guild] [H***]: So I get on, right?

[Guild] [H***]: And then (dun dun dun) OH GOD, A HUMAN

[Guild] [M***]: That’s adorable.

[Guild] [Riley]: LOL

[Guild] [H***]: So naturally, with how I think, I figure /dance will make them not kill me, right?

[Guild] [H***]: Sort of a white flag

[Guild] [Riley]: Hahahaha

[Guild] [Riley]: I’m seriously cracking up irl

[Guild] [H***]: And then he started dancing back and I was all :D

[Guild] [Riley]: Jason thinks I’m insane

[Guild] [H***]: And later learned I was never in danger.

[Guild] [H***]: Hahaha yay! >_<

[Guild] [M***]: Lol!!

[Guild] [H***]: Bahahaha
[Guild] [Mah]: Hah. “why is this random hordie dancing with me? Oh well. /dance”

[Guild] [H***]: xD

[Guild] [Riley]: that’s so adorable xD

[Guild] [H***]: I was like, awww, nice human to not kill me!

[Guild] [Riley]: I had to let Jason know the story too fyi :p

[Guild] [H***]: (This was on R***, btw)

[Guild] [Riley]: LOL

[Guild] [H***]: xD

[Guild] [M***]: mark asked what I was laughing about too. He liked that you felt dancing would get you out of trouble

[Guild] [H***]:::D

[Guild] [H***]: How is Mark doing, btw?

[Guild] [Mah]: That should be a way of life. Bad performance review? Dance for that bonus~

[Guild] [H***]: Oh god, I’d never get a bonus then

[2. Trade] [Unuk-Shandris]: LFM [For The Horde!] Pst for inv

[Guild] [H***]: Unless it wasn’t based on it being good

[Guild] [Mah]: Lol

[Guild] [M***]: He is good! Thank you for asking :)

[Guild] [H***]: \o/

[Guild] [M***]: That picture with you in the background is still hanging in our house. HAHA

[Nav] has earned the achievement [Needy]!

You barely even register the scrolling requests for quest help from random players. You skip right over the various chat channel intrusions hiccupping between the interactions. You take
screen shots and flip between the interface and an open document on your desktop so that you can record their conversations without missing the rapid-fire responses. You do pet battles while monitoring the guild chat. You juggle your own play with the research and with the guild and with the individual players.

The tension is almost completely gone from the night. You know it's still there, but it will creep back on you when you process what happened. But your eyes and your ears and your fingers are too busy to dwell.

That's all it takes sometimes. You imagine these voices, although you have never figured out how to get Mumble to work on your computer. You just listen while you read their interactions. You know some of these players, Riley especially. She’s been your go-to lady for information. You chat/whisper to each other almost every day. How are you doing? How is your project?

Only one more month and I am free! She is also in grad school and counting the days until she graduates. She is your confidante and friend. You are quiet and just watch these Daughters of the Horde lives happen.

This presence, here and there, this mitigation of distance between players—all of it evaporates. These layers of sociality are fractal. They form between players, in their homes, in their headsets, in their guild chat, in their partners reading over their shoulders or listening to the laughter. These layers spiral inward. And outward. This isn't magic. There is no circle.

***

8:00 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s

“This is very bad. This city is controlled by the Sabbat. And half of you are Camarilla. They aren’t going to care if we just got teleported across time and space. We’re fucking dead unless you do everything I say. They under no circumstances can find out that you are anything BUT
my pack, understand?” Dominik doesn’t ask us, really. This is a demand. Jesus, Hans has upped the tension in the room. *No he hasn’t. It’s you.* In all the years you have been coming here on Saturday nights, you have never played *Vampire* without Hans as GM. You have never witnessed his *Vampire* play-style until now. The other players warned you about this. They told you that he *always* takes over. *So what? He needs to play this way in the same way you do.*

Dominik is Sabbat. Gertrude, Don, and Heinrich are Camarilla. Lydia, Stanislov, and me, Anya, are unaligned. That’s why they were all in St. Petersburg in the first place. They were trying to recruit us in their political war and none of us were interested. Dominik killed our Prince—Stanislov’s and Lydia’s sire. He smiles and hints that he diablerized him—sucked out every drop of his blood including his soul to become even more powerful. And he wants us to trust him? He wants us to make him pack leader? He’s a Lasombra—a tricky, low-humanity manipulator. Hans loves playing that clan because they are wicked incarnate. *You know all about that, don’t you?* Gertrude is a fellow Gangrel, although she is a bit furrier around the edges. It’s a tell-tale sign of how far she has fallen. The lower the humanity, the more animalistic a Gangrel appears. Franz loves her hairy legs, has mentioned her fuzzy chest. He plays her as himself. As a joke. As the clown. Don is Ventrue—the stereotypical politician and Camarilla leader. Patty’s boyfriend has never played *Vampire* before. Hans gave me a Ventrue for my first *Vampire* character, too. They are the closest to human in terms of recognizable behavior. They are capitalists. They are almost always Republican and their most powerful ability is to dominate. Utter mind control. Heinrich is Nosferatu—hideous in appearance and a brilliant spy able to disguise his face in order to not cause humans to shriek in terror at his presence. Connie plays him as a “big damn hero,” though. She will learn not to do that once he meets the final death. Lydia and Stanislov, sharing the same sire, are Tzimisce—one of the oldest clans, corrupted,
cruel flesh-crafters. My daughter and Ula play them as depraved, yet somehow, urbane siblings. They are Dracula. And me, their Gangrel playmate. None of us could pass for human. We are monsters. But some of us are more human than others.

“Who is ready for food?” Ula gets up from the table to check on the dog. The space shifts back to the house. Something sweet is baking in the oven. The house smells of sugar, and smoke, and Hans’ IPod is set to a Genius List playing off of Bauhaus. You hear “Killing Moon,” now. Everyone seems so relaxed.

The night passes with intrigues and split settings. Hans, Patty’s boyfriend, and Franz keep leaving the table to go conspire in the spare room. Ula, Patty, Connie, and you discuss work and administrative headaches. They ask you about your daughter’s date. It’s pleasant and most of the conversations take place at the table. The house is built for two people and a beast of a dog. Packing _Vampire_ in on Saturdays in this house usually feels intimate, but tonight the walls are just so so close. Ula waits for the brownies to finish baking and the guys come back to the table discussing the latest MMA fight. _You fake it. You love them all so much, but you can’t perform properly._

You watch Hans’s behavior, though. All night, you watch and notice the exaggerated movements. The louder than usual voice. He redirects all conversations towards Patty’s boyfriend. And you realize why he is performing his character this way. Tonight is about showing the newest player the ropes. Hans is showing off, trying to impress the new guy. And that means, Hans is playing ugly. _And there. You have your victim. Our versions of playing ugly are different tonight. But they serve a purpose. One is for establishing a necessary social hierarchy. The other, well. You hurt the people you love sometimes._
Here and there again. Different frames. Some protective. Some not. We have our alibis. You are thinking of Goffman, again. And what you had said about anonymity and the protective cloak. And disinhibition. Our personas are not ourselves. It's your mantra.

***

11:30 p.m. WoW

Quinn has left the guild.
To [Riley]: awww. Quinn left?
[Riley] whispers: yeah. She wants to raid with her hubby’s guild. And said she might come back sometime.
To [Riley]: ahhh.
[Riley] whispers: hate losing people for raiding. >_< makes me so frustrated!!! Uggh.
To [Riley]: it’ll pick up closer to the expansion.
[Riley] whispers: probably, yeah. I wonder if in wod we’ll be getting back into raiding, though.
We had so much trouble this expansion.
To [Riley]: why?
[Riley] whispers: I don’t know :/ we don’t have many raiders and then those who are interested in raiding leave

[Pet Battle]: Your Nordrassil Wisp gains 240 XP.

[Pet Battle]: Your Wildhammer Gryphon Hatchling gains 240 XP.

You receive loot: [Noxious Scorpid Stinger].

To [Riley]: wish I could get back into raiding sometimes, but it was so stressful…and I never knew what the hell I was doing

You receive loot: [Noxious Scorpid Stinger]
[Riley] whispers: that’s why I had my brief moment of raiding in cata and then quit. I was raid tank and it was too stressful, even in doth’s casual atmosphere.

[Riley] whispers: poor quetzl hasn’t had much playing time since ;(
To [Riley]: aww

[Pet Battle]: Your Phaed gains 653 XP.
To [Riley]: stress is just a killer man
You receive loot: [Embersilk Cloth] x 5.
[Riley] whispers: it really is.

[Riley] whispers: especially when you don’t know when it’s going to end. :( You receive loot: [Ruined Embersilk Scraps] x3.
You receive loot: [Sparkling Oasis Water].
You loot 45 Silver, 99 Copper.
To [Riley]: that’s the sucky part. Sick feedback loop
[Riley] whispers: yep.

You screenshot your private conversation and skip over the really-personal moments. Those intimate and private spaces are between you and her and not for others. But they do let you know she trusts you enough to share those fears. It’s safe. So you don’t violate that trust. You like her. She’s kind, and sensitive, and smart, and so so sad at times. You want to help but you want to research, too. And you wonder how you can be a friend and a witness at the same time. That’s how you see research, of course. Bearing witness.
To [Riley]: <sends virtual hugs through internet with my mind>

[Hal] has earned the achievement [Going Down?]!
[Hal] has earned the achievement [Extreme Treasure Hunter]!
[Guild] [Stitche]: yeah!
[Guild] [Hal]: Woohoo!

[Riley] whispers: is there any reason why you avoid grouping?

[Guild] [Riley]: grats!

To [Riley]: not really. I just am so sporadic because of having the kids around. Soloing doesn’t require constantly saying brb—kid stuff. But after a certain level, it gets harder to group because I don’t know how to play with others so they get frustrated.

[Sol] has come online.

[Guild] [Riley]: heading off for the night, hopefully…take care, ladies. :)

[Guild] [Hal]: Have a good night, Riley!

To [Riley]: night. try to get some sleep.

[Riley] whispers: I’ll try. Thank you for your kindness. *hugs*

[Guild] [Riley]: you too :)

Riley has gone offline.

[Pet Battle]: Your Nordrassil Wisp gains 400 XP.

You realize that reading this now, it’s difficult to tell when these moments are private or public because you bounce between both so quickly and so effortlessly. But in-game, you know that each of these spaces gets color coded automatically. Whispers are purple. Public guild chat is green. Going offline, coming online, yellow. Every color signifying movement towards and away. And you wonder how these bubbles of guild protected space have blocked the outside out. And if it really has.

Intimacies through trust of the private boundary. Through explicit rules of respect for fellow guildies. And rules of respect for participant observation. We know these scripts well. So the interface is irrelevant. Gone. Because we all know how to read it. The game has taught us this.
8:30 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s

“I don’t know guys, Hans is totally railroading me. He keeps telling me how to run the game,” Patty is a bit sheepish when she confesses it to us.

The guys have retreated to the back room, again. Conspiring. But it’s not Hans’s campaign—he shouldn’t be controlling this much of the story. Especially since Patty isn’t even in the room with them. Being a GM is supposed to mean being God. You can tell she is embarrassed a little. It was supposed to be her night to shine. Wait. She’s been GM for months now. You are not being honest with why this bothers you. He is overstepping, but he’s also getting her boyfriend involved.

You do wonder about this. You know you are in a bad mood tonight. You know playing ugly is the last thing you need. Sometimes, you like it. Or that might not be the right word. Sometimes, playing ugly serves a purpose. When you were going through your messy divorce last year, you needed to play ugly. Hans had described it at the time as catharsis. That playing ugly was a safety valve and that it helped you deal with the real world by purging all of the sewage from your head. That’s why he plays ugly. You needed to purge the guilt you felt for familial failure. And purging sometimes means hurting yourself through the ugliness.

But playing ugly usually gets your characters killed because they always talk back. That last ugly campaign, with your black vampire feminist superhero, Audre? The one you don’t like talking about? She was arguing with an NPC who treated her like the help. Of course that NPC ordered her to shut up, even though an entire city’s wellbeing was at stake and someone needed to say something. And of course, that NPC ordered her again, to not say another word and what did you say? Audre answered “Yessuh,” thick with sarcasm and contempt. See what you did
there? Your persona said it, not you. You were perfectly aware of how culturally loaded that
term was, but you were also thinking that they would understand the irony and the lesson. Audre
got her head cut off, instead.

That’s why you don’t want to play ugly right now. You do not need to punish yourself
tonight. But you will. And no way can you spin it in your head to think it will be a teachable
moment. But you will.

So much privilege. But you are still center-stage, even when thinking of that form of playing
ugly. It’s easy to appropriate when you can just leave the circle at 11:00 p.m. every Saturday.

***

11:45 p.m. WoW

You’re talking to yourself. You may be sitting at your keyboard watching Stitche complete
the last of the Daily solo quests, but most of the guild has gone to bed. Not everyone, but the ones
that are left are doing LFRs and guild chat is quiet. You don’t even need the sound up. The
background environmental noises, the NPC voices, the incidental music, none of it is necessary
for what you are doing. You like it, actually. The house is quiet, and it’s just you and the
interface. Stitche is doing pet battles with the Elekk Plushie she made.

But you are talking to yourself and you knew that was what was going to happen once you
stopped engaging with the guild. You are rehashing. You are having imaginary conversations
with Hans. You are trying out different insults, different comebacks, different methods of how the
night could have gone if you just would have been able to channel your wittiness in a more
timely manner. Why is it that you always come up with the most perfect responses after the event
has long passed? You role-play what you should have done. It would have worked out so much
better.
9:00 p.m. Hans’ and Ula’s House

You are trying. You try to think of a way to adjust to the play-style presented to you. The others don’t seem to be having as difficult of a time. Because playing ugly isn’t always about hurting others or yourself. They aren’t here for that. They game for other reasons. They are here because of their friendships. You do wonder about that, too. In your interview with Franz, he had mentioned that the game never has to devolve into a screaming match. And yet, you do end up screaming sometimes. Maybe a lot. Screaming can be therapeutic. Maybe you are part of the problem. You thought Franz was talking about Hans taking the game too seriously, but Hans and you have always been alike in that regard. Was he talking about you, too? What does that mean, anyway?

So you are trying to cope through immersing into the role. I am still an 18th century Russian Gangrel. I am still not beholden to any political faction. I walk over to Beacon Theatre to watch Siouxsie and the Banshees perform. I dissolve into mist and hover in the rafters to watch. I float through the place, slow, high up enough to not be noticed. I stick to shadows and pour underneath doorways, watching. I am a predator. A python of mist and death.

I am no longer just an 18th century Russian Gangrel. I rematerialize in a bathroom stall and walk out surrounded by other club girls, humans, doing lines of coke on the sinks. They squeal when they see me. Not afraid, but wanting to fix my appearance. Patty explains this transformation to us. I fit, now. I become one of the punk kids listening to Siouxsie sing “Dazzle.”

“Go get her,” Dominik says to Stanislav or Heinrich. One of them. It’s irrelevant who he orders to come find me. It’s the order that counts. My name is Anya. They find me and take me back.
Somehow, we have found a haven. A safe house where we can rest and stay hidden from other Kindred. It’s not a house, really. It’s a one room shit hole with rats and roaches. It smells like urine. But we are all together.

“Anya, follow that Camarilla we met. The one who gave us his business card. I need to know who he is and what he wants. You can find him at this address.” Dominik points at me and hands me the business card. I cannot read it. He orders the rest of the group to walk across town to meet a Sabbat representative and they balk.

“Let’s take this thing they call the subway, instead. I’m not walking,” Gertrude says. The others nod. They play it off as a cute culture shock moment—vampires so confused by modernity that the “metal carriages” and “underground trains” are exciting opportunities.

“You do what the fuck you want,” and Dominik snaps at the rest of them. He walks out of the haven and walks the entire way. Hans gets up from the table and walks to the kitchen to grab another beer.

“Oh come on,” Patty or Ula says. “The subway is faster, just come with us,” Franz says. You notice the switch in and out of character and you know they aren’t talking to his character now. They know this side of Hans. He can be petulant when he doesn’t get what he wants. And it’s part of playing ugly. You get to be an asshole, but it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference.

The performances are becoming muddled in part because the rules of intimacy are changing. We have conflicting motivations tonight. Too many power struggles. Too little transparency. Hans is bringing Patty’s boyfriend into the fold, but you? You don’t feel connected. You are slipping, untethered. And immersion isn’t possible. Isn’t safe.

And it feels inevitable.
Midnight, *WoW*

You realize that there really aren’t any outside voices interfering with guild chat. It’s as if *WoW* is entirely fragmented—each person getting their own pocket of game space. It’s easy to forget that there are millions of other players in this game world right now. You don’t see other character bodies and you don’t see other voices in the general chat channels. So you venture out of your garrison, your safe zone, and you port to game spaces where you think more random players can be found. You think if you can pick up on some of the conversations, you can compare the interactions. So you head to Warspear in Ashran. That is this expansion’s main hub of activity. If you were to walk outside of Warspear, the rest of Ashran is a PVP zone.

Changed Channel: [1. General – Warspear]

Changed Channel: [2. LocalDefense – Warspear]

*NPC voices bombard her as you take Stitche through the fort. You walk her past the orc guards.*

Warspear Grunt says: Bah! Who cares about some old, dusty relics? I came here to bash some Alliance heads in!

Warspear Grunt says: Do you even understand why we’re here in Ashran?

*You walk her past the saloon. Stitche does not go inside, but the chat still shows up in the chat bar so you can overhear what the NPC patrons are talking about inside.*

Excavator Rustshiv says: Is beer the only thing these orcs drink? What does a goblin gotta do to get a nice cocktail around here?

Excavator Hardtooth says: It ain’t so bad. It kinda make me nostalgic.

Excavator Rustshiv says: Nostalgic? How does that swill make you nostalgic?
Excavator Hardtooth says: Well, the taste kinda reminds me of the runoff water from cooling the machines back home. It’s all we had to drink when I was a kid.

Excavator Rustshiv says: Wow, that’s… surprisingly accurate.

You see five or six characters in the Auction House building. They huddle in front of the NPC while they buy and sell, but no one is chatting. So you take a portal to Dalaran to see if there are any players interacting there. Where Warspear is an orc controlled outpost—open space layout, crudely built thatched buildings, wooden fences, brown and red and primitive looking spears, Dalaran is controlled by human and blood elf mages. The entire city floats above Crystalsong Forest. The buildings are ornate and intricately layered in gold and filigree. There are floating crystal lights and formal gardens. It is a palace city, refined, purple, gold, and topaz beautiful.

[Changed Channel: [2. LocalDefense – Dalaran]

Rhonin yells: Algalon was sent here to judge the fate of our world.

Rhonin yells: He found a planet whose races had deviated from the titans’ blueprints. A planet where not everything had gone according to plan.

Rhonin yells: Cold logic deemed our world not worth saving. Cold logic, however, does not account for the power of free will. It’s up to each of us to prove this is a world worth saving.

Rhonin yells: That our lives… our lives are worth living.

And still no one is talking. If Stitche stands still for just a minute, the NPC repeats the entire speech. And while the conversations Stitche has come across have all been built into the game narrative, you still think they are informative. You cannot compare player conversations right now, but you cannot help notice the racialized narratives. While both WoW locations are neutral safe zones, Elysiums, if you will, one is warmongering, unrefined, and poor. The other is a place of peace, tranquility, and privilege. Only the seedy underbelly of the sewers hints at the
falseness. Maybe this is why you always play Horde instead of Alliance. One is always framed as the Noble Savage and the other is Proper Western Civilization. One fights for pleasure and the other fights for the greater good. You choose pleasure in WoW. Always.

Privilege is built into the narrative. Into the game design. And it’s the default position that goes unvoiced and unchallenged. Hence, seeing the strings, seeing the privilege, is deviant.

***

9:30 p.m. Hans’s and Ula’s House

My spying was a bust. That Camarilla vampire knew I was following him in bat form the entire time and ordered me to tell Dominik to back off. He spoke to me in flawless Russian. So I fly back and let the rest of the group know. They don’t seem surprised.

“You, Heinrich, Stan, and Lydia need to entertain a very special guest tonight. I’ve been mentoring this woman her entire life. I have been her patron for many years now and we need to keep her on our side. Her sire is the guy you were just following and we need to know where her loyalties lie.” Dominik says. You try to figure out the time logistics of when he might have “mentored” this woman. We just got to NYC so is she also from the 18th century? Or is Hans manipulating Patty’s story, again? Knock it off.

“I really don’t think I should be schmoozing. That is really not part of my job description,” I say and you are laughing at the absurdity of me at a dinner table. *You can barely function out of the game. Socializing inside? Performances on performances. It’s too much.*

But Dominik points at me directly. “Actually, you will go and you are needed there.” And that’s that.

You do not do well with anyone telling you what you will do or won’t when you role-play. *Not tonight.* Hans knows this, too. I am a goddamned martial monster. I am not built for small
talk. I am a weapon and I am being wasted here. What the heck do they keep doing in the back room? Hans took Franz and Patty’s boyfriend back there again. They won’t tell you anything.

The dinner guest is a prissy Pollyanna who says things like “Oh, my master is very kind. He is truly a delight…” and your character wants to vomit. But we aren’t actually playing much, either. The “dinner” took all of two minutes. We said hi, she went all “my master this my master that,” and that was it. This was just a ruse to keep us busy while the real work of role-play happened in the back room.

You make small talk with Ula. Connie falls asleep on the couch. But the guys? They come back to the table an hour later. They are loud, laughing. Franz wakes up Connie and they prepare to leave for the night. You start to pick up your stuff, too. You want to get out of here. Before you say something you will regret. You blame the night on Hans. No you don’t. He’s a mirror, remember? You blame (yourself) him for everything. Even the boredom. Even though it’s Patty’s campaign, it’s really his. So you blame him for not including us in that back room.

Remove all of this. You know the interpretation is inaccurate. You are playing ugly because you need to punch something. You need to lash out and scream and your mother’s dead so you pick the other people you love who you think can take it. You pick Hans because he’s your counterpart. You don’t hate these people. You love them because they let you play through pain.

You love them.

But no. It’s not that easy to leave. They keep playing and your fate is sealed. That rage you felt the last time you all played ugly. That campaign with Audre? It was just like this. It may not seem so on the surface, but it is. Looking back over this story of the story, you know that there is another story embedded. And you know how confusing it is.
But that earlier campaign, the one with Audre, was narratively worse and spun out so much more quickly. And you had something to do with that one, too.

But what did you expect when six white players participated in a racialized *Vampire* campaign? What did you expect when Hans, as GM, placed a campaign in Gary, Indiana amidst squalor and poverty and the destitute? What did you think was going to happen when no one knew how to “be” black except through the images we have seen in television, music, and film? Playing ugly is about purging sewage, alright. But it doesn’t really get purged at all. It doesn’t become social commentary (*oh, and isn’t that the way you want to view it? The way you want to elevate it to something meaningful?*) just because Franz played his Toreador, Toby, as a part-time pimp and Michael Jackson wannabe. Or that your daughter’s Gangrel was a 13 year old mother named Makiya. Or Connie’s Ventrue was a self-identified Jewish American Princess named Dahlia. Or Ula’s Malkavian was Audre’s closeted gay brother, Jamahl? I didn’t become a black savior just because I had a plan to use my education to “take back the streets.” We were not playing characters at all, then. Just caricatures. And by the time Audre had her head ripped from her body that ugly campaign ruptured along with it.

And that’s what happens now. You fucking snapped, but this time you took it way too far. Your turn as victimizer wasn’t agreed upon. You played ugly *wrong* and ruined everything.

“Ok, let’s divvy up the points earned tonight,” Patty says.

You stage whisper and roll your eyes, “Not that we did anything to earn them…” and Ula laughs, “I know, right?”

“Oh man, you have NO idea how close it was. How could you do that?” and Hans turns towards Patty’s boyfriend. “How could you turn on me like that?” And for a split second, Patty’s boyfriend does seriously the best John Wayne impersonation without even trying. You expect
him to say “pardner” any second, but he just smiles and makes eye contact with Patty. *He’s in. He’s officially part of the group now."

Don, the Camarilla Ventrue, stayed true to his political affiliation and didn’t become Sabbat. Not that the rest of us know exactly what happened. It all took place in the back room. While we were having cocktails with the milksop. Dominik shakes his head slow and rolls his eyes at us.

“Whooo, man you have no idea the shit we just went through. It was brutal.”

“Wait, *what*?” I say, putting all of the weight into the *what*. It’s the same *what* your mother used to give us when she called you out. That *what* is a power word. You are trying to stay in character, but you are slipping. And so is Dominik. The bleeding isn’t just a trickle now. Both of us have opened an artery.

“That Camarilla guy you followed? Wayyy too powerful to stay in the city. We had to convince him to leave because there was no way us three were going to be able to take him down and he was going to screw up any chance at us keeping our cover. That was DICEY.” Dominik blows through his mouth, an airy whistle.

“Well, I am SO glad you had such a great time in there,” and holy shit, you do not even know who is saying this because you and your character are both pissed off for different reasons. You also know you would never have opened your mouth if Franz and Connie had stayed. Or if you would have left when you could. No, for you playing ugly means ripping Hans apart. Without consent. *Right now, you are closer to that online guy who threatened to blow off Uulir’s head with a .22 than a friend participating in taboo play.*

“We could have helped. Who knows, maybe with seven vampires we could have killed him. But no. We got stuck HAVING COCKTAILS.” And you are trying hard not to write this in *all*
caps and exclamation points. Your face is getting hot and you see that the other players are starting to fidget.

“You wanted to be pack leader so bad, but you left us so that you could go play with the boys. Why didn’t you bring us?”

“Bring you? We had our own mission we were doing. No one said you had to sit there!” and Hans is screaming and you are screaming. We are positioned as far away from each other at the table as you can get. He is at the head, you are at the foot. But neither of you move.

And that’s when Patty and Ula start trying to calm us down. They try to deescalate. They do. *Jesus, they have to be sick of this. We butt heads so much. But it’s different tonight. Untethered.*

“Well, *you* do have a tendency to get secretive for no reason. And *he* does have a point,” Patty says, but she doesn’t look at either of us. She picks up the notes in front of her, trying to put them in her folder. Ula is nodding. Leans over and starts cleaning off the table.

All gloves are off, though. You know you are pissed at not being included. You wanted *(needed)* to play ugly, not just socialize. You wanted to show what your character could do. And your character is pissed because she, too, is ill equipped for schmoozing and small talk and she wanted to go be a club kid and listen to punk music and try not to think of how homesick she was for 18th century Russia. *Projecting so much here.* And yes, you do not like having Patty’s boyfriend here because you think part of the reason why Hans is excluding the women is because he is performing as an alpha-male. We have *three* alpha-males in the group, now. Three hypermasculine dudes who bond over MMA fights and beer and football and don’t lift a finger to help clean off the table or make the food. *Well, yes, but so what? This is an excuse isn’t it? You are finding reasons to be pissed off. You want your rage to mean something. This was an initiation of sorts. Patty’s boyfriend needed to feel included tonight and you are taking that*
necessity away from him because of your own baggage. And that means the group dynamics are off again. You don’t want to lose that synergy you had. Things fall apart, remember? You cannot control the inevitable. Even Ula mentioned it in her interview. The way that we all hover over the table when we work as a team. She loved that part. We all participated, then. We all found a way to work within a play-style and we didn’t fall asleep on the couch. Speaking for Connie now? You are grasping, aren’t you?

“YOU, YOU CAN STOP SITTING ON YOUR ASS,” Hans screams it at you but the tenor has shifted. It’s not just a pissed off scream, it’s theatrical and would be funny if directed elsewhere. “AND…STOP ACTING LIKE I OWE YOU SOMETHING. YOU’RE ACTING LIKE,” and he pauses for a second. “A WELFARE QUEEN!” And he spits it at you and the rest of the group gasps and at that second you have no idea if it is Hans or Dominik screaming. It’s meant to shock and offend but also to try to defuse through absurdity—that’s why his scream sounded fake. It was the scream of a circus monster, not a real person. He was trying to defuse, dammit. But the bleed, the bleed…it coats all of the original intent and confuses everything.

So you rage quit. What else are you going to do? It’s part of the performance. You grab your purse and your plate, so conveniently sitting beside you on the couch now that Connie and Franz have left, and you make the briefest of eye contacts with Ula as you head for the door and in that second you both know that’s it. In that small glance, Ula acknowledges the final rupture.

Noticing the strings, the privilege, the problems, and not acting—there are repercussions.

***

12:01 a.m. Wow

You want to level your python before you log for the night. She’s too fragile right now. She can only take one hit before dying and doesn’t do much damage against higher level critters.
You named her Death. Ula texts as you are finishing up. “Hey—d&d is on hiatus for awhile—hope all is good your way—hate this weather.” This is how The Deliverers combat toxicity. They remove it so it doesn’t infect the group.

[Bitrah] comes online.

[Guild] [Bitrah]: hi, ladies. How are you all doing?

[Guild] [Stitche]: just fine!

You lie to them, in other words. You didn’t tell DotH about the blow up. You didn’t tell them about Hans. You haven’t even told anyone that your mother died two weeks ago even though you’re sure they all would have been really supportive. But you didn’t. Not one bit of ugliness present the entire time here. It’s a guild that may not know anything about your real life, but as a member of Daughter of the Horde, understands the need to just be here and acknowledged. Death levels and you begin the log off process. You sit Stitche down and the timer counts down from ten.

[Guild] [Stitche]: night, ladies!

Stitche has gone offline.

You don’t text Ula back. There is no need.

***

As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, playing ugly is used to describe one gaming group’s play-style, but the first step in analyzing the “Fragile Pythons” narrative is to discuss the characteristics of playing ugly in terms of what it is.

**Playing Ugly Is Taboo**

Sarah Lynne Bowman describes one type of identity alteration in role-playing games as an enactment of the Taboo Self. That by enacting a character that explores taboo subjects such as
rape, incest, and murder, a player is able to explore identities in a relatively safe environment without fear of out-of-game consequences. The Deliverers on Saturday nights from 6:00-11:00 p.m. This state does not exist outside of those orderly parameters specifically due to the exhaustive quality associated with maintaining this play mode. What is interesting to note here about Huizinga’s connection to the temporary is that he describes play as highly connected to aesthetics, going so far as stating that play “has a tendency to be beautiful” specifically because of its “impulse to create orderly form” and therefore “demands order absolute and supreme.” But playing ugly subverts this tendency in spite of still holding the same aesthetic focus on the role of order. The subversion lies within the way that tensions between the players and the taboos create order in spite of (or because of) the performance of moral ambiguity. Order absolute and supreme is made temporarily horrific and gross.

Playing Ugly Is Privileged

Taboo play is playing out the imagined monstrous. The imagined occupies a positioning outside of reality—outside of a player’s own lived material existence. That requires a privileged

---

319 Bowman, The Functions of Role-Playing Games, 176.

320 Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 10.

321 Ibid.
vantage point in order for this type of play to be rendered safe, intimate, and pleasurable for these players. This vantage point allows players who have not experienced the monstrous a way to imagine the lives of those who have—whether through identifying with the perpetrators or with the victims. But this self-identification also allows for different modes of incorporation. Playing ugly may be role-playing as a reaction to a horrific story (whether the narrative or the character backstory) or it may mean being ugly for the sake of the story, but both imaginings rely on a vantage point that is secure in its understanding of the player’s social, political, and cultural power advantages.

**Playing Ugly is Performance**

At all times, playing ugly requires an acute understanding of audience expectations. Indeed, this mode of play is reliant on the other players to act as censures and foils for that performance. In a way that harkens back to childhood playgrounds and such games as grosser-than-gross and king-of-the-hill, there is a level of one-upmanship that is, if not encouraged, at the very least sanctioned through silence. Whether there is a gendered component to this play style is also possible. In the case of *The Deliverers*, this was sometimes the case—the players most often associated with playing ugly as victimizer were the male players—males that would consider themselves hypermasculine in appearance and behaviors and would brazenly flaunt racial and sexist epithets and stereotypes purely for the shock value. The performance of racist and sexist language was part of the scripts that anticipated and required a reaction by the audience—in this case other female players. The females in the group were more vocal in reacting to the play-style and more likely to play ugly as a reaction to a storyline that required them to role-play taboo. In both cases, the audience response becomes a part of the performance—which is in the case of

---

322 But as the narrative shows, the role of victimizer isn’t always performed by males.
most role-playing games in some way. But when playing ugly, the performance of offense contains a component that also acts as moral reaffirmation. Indeed, by playing as monsters, it acknowledges the performance as monstrous. Hence, all players actually reinforce their moral positionings by becoming that which horrifies them. Playing ugly, then, can be seen as a performative means of purging every-day horror.

**Playing Ugly Is Fragile**

Because playing ugly is under heavy temporal constraints due to the emotional exhaustion that can take place, this play mode is difficult to maintain. One reason for this might be the ever-changing shift in the level of bleed. Even when members maintain intimacy and trust, other social factors can disrupt the game. As the narrative shows, when players inject their personal lives into their gaming lives, the bleed through can be disastrous. When playing ugly, there are many barriers to intimacy that have to be constantly negotiated. Whether it’s because this play mode relies heavily on consensus or because of the heightened state of vulnerability, playing ugly is susceptible to rupture precisely because of its dependency on its group members to maintain order. Bleed affects this dependency because it disrupts the “order absolute and supreme.” Bleed, in other words, breaks the magic circle precisely because it violates the sanctity of that supreme space.

**Playing Ugly Is about Power**

The power dynamics within a tight-knit group of role-players like *The Deliverers* is far different than the online *World of Warcraft* guild, *Daughters of the Horde* and one key difference between the two is the way that alliances function when the play-style involves playing ugly. Because this play-style is so susceptible to bleed, one key way that members combat the intrusion is by playing with romantic or familial partners as a buffering agent. This singling out
of a player is not particularly directed along gender lines, either. Non-academic male players new to the gaming group (and role-playing in general) were ruthlessly bullied until they quit, as well as two past male members who, in spite of a long history of role-playing with other members, abruptly quit after being made targets. Indeed, one past member turned violent when harassed and hasn’t played with the group since. In most cases, bullied and harassed players were singled out not because they were alone, but because there were no other anchors in the group to act in their defense. No partnered players have ever been harassed and bullied (at least within the last decade) in a way that made them quit the group. And that bullying behavior has usually been perpetrated by the two male players most likely to play ugly by playing as victimizer. Bleed, in this case, becomes a reinforcement of power differences—bullying is made a weapon to keep those perceived power structures in place. Hence, my own overstepping and subsequent removal from the group makes sense—attacking Hans had no power due to those anchors present. But because I did not have an anchor and acted as victimizer outside of the narrative, those power dynamics were upset and were met with immediate removal.

**Playing Ugly Considerations**

One key distinction between the online and offline RPG environments that this dissertation analyzes lies with the concept of negotiation. Those who play in MMORPGs may have considerable overlaps with those who play exclusively in land based RPGs but how these players negotiate their gaming ecologies is dependent upon the ways in which their gaming relationships negotiate tensions. When playing ugly is an agreed upon play-style, there are still considerable barriers that can prevent players from weathering difficult, and sometimes toxic, gaming environments. An agreed-upon play style is just one factor. As the rest of this dissertation shows,
elements of intimacy relate to these connections and disconnections and highlight how these negotiations are tied to intimacy and performance.

But playing ugly, as the “Fragile Pythons” narrative illustrates, is also rife with inconsistencies and caveats.

**Caveat #1: Ugly Is Not Always Exploitive**

When *The Deliverers* play, ugly play is reserved for certain characters. But the players who participate in that ugly play are almost always the same. Patty, Ula, my daughter, and myself have always had storylines both in *D&D* and in *Vampire* where our characters are forced to participate in role-play that, on the surface, seem to lack any real agency. A prime example would be Audre, the black feminist vampire gang raped at the beginning of the ugliest campaign *The Deliverers* ever role-played. While this character was given to me as a ready-made blank slate, I was expected to perform much in the same way that an actor receives a screenplay. I decided how to play her based on the motivations that I saw for her. Numerous times, other players received their characters in the same way: prefab. The creative process comes into play once the player receives the character sheet.

When the DM/GM is the one designing the character, player subjectivity is still present, but the work of creation starts at a different point in the evolution of the character. But to suggest that receiving a prefab character that is designed for playing ugly is problematic is too simplistic.

As stated earlier, playing ugly is highly connected to concepts of privilege. Because of an imagined understanding of how a character’s backstory can influence the way that I play that character, I readily acknowledge the limitations that such a performance entails. But that does not mean those limitations are just exploitive, either. On the surface, it seems otherwise: *The Deliverers* are white, mostly upper middle class, highly educated adult men and women. Playing
ugly sometimes means playing as prostitutes, pimps, and Russian mafia. We play with race, with sex, with depravity, and sometimes all combined. Some players, playing as victimizers, play as exaggerated stereotypes—by becoming a caricature, they no longer have to identify with their character’s actions. Some players, playing as victim, imagine an idealized hero fighting oppression by becoming a savior—by denying their characters complexity, they render what Alice Crawford argues is “an identification with the ideal and a denial of lank.”323 This is not a defense of play-style. This is not a denial of the very real appropriation that takes place. This is playing ugly. But, Alice Crawford also argues that a self-centered, narcissistic identification of an Other (one where there is a flattening out in order to deny that which is different) isn’t the sole means of identity formation. She also describes a different mode—one that goes outward rather than inward. Instead of denying difference, the subject “rather than attempting to see all that is ideal in the visual register as an aspect of an all-consuming self, is capable of appreciating the ideal in others and…recognizes the subjectivity of others who do not necessarily fit neatly within the parameters of normative codes of representation.”324 If this second mode of identification is applied to playing ugly, then playing ugly may not be just about appropriation or exploitation—there might be an intersubjective mechanism at work that allows players to empathize with others but through a lens made monstrous in order to “defang” the unknown.

Caveat #2: Ugly Is Not Always Shameful

Shame is slippery when discussing how it functions in ugly play. In order for a player to feel shame, there needs to be a clear understanding of what exactly is taboo. While all members of


324 Ibid, 983.
*The Deliverers* feel that their play-style is different than other table-top gaming groups, they were more inclined to describe the group as “adult.” But members in this play group were also very clear about not wanting their real names to be used, either. They *know* this play-style is problematic, which is why membership is so guarded. But one aspect that also needs to be addressed is that playing ugly isn’t always directed outwards to an unknowable Other. Sometimes, members play with gender identities that are far more knowable. Playing with gender in the context of playing ugly is not met with the same level of hostility as when playing ugly with race. There is something about this kind of performance that keeps the act of playing ugly from becoming shameful, and therefore monstrous.

All members in *The Deliverers* have crossed gender lines in these campaigns. We’ve been gender-fluid Dominatrixes, hypersexualized female wizards who use “vagina magic,” drag queens, butch lesbian vampires, closeted gay vampires, and asexual halfling thieves. Hans and Franz’s characters have had sex and they have visited brothels together. Ula’s character has flirted with my daughter’s. Tensions in these performances have rarely ever been present—censures and sanctions are rarely used in this kind of play. These are also some of the more enjoyable aspects of this play-style. Indeed, playing with gender is treated as a safe way to promote intimacy and is far more common than any other type of playing ugly campaign.

**Caveat #3: Ugly Is Not Always Carnival**

Mikhail Bakhtin describes carnival as manifesting in three forms: ritual spectacle, comic verbal composition, and “genres of billingsgate.” Ritual spectacle requires audience members

---

325 When his character cast a spell, Hans would make a point of placing his hands between his spread legs, and make a loud whooshing noise.

to be on equal footing. They are not satirists because they do not place themselves above the text or in opposition. Instead, they belong to the text and to the world that created that text. It relies on “turnabout” and is a “continual shifting from top to bottom…of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations…a second life…” Bakhtin emphasizes that laughter—at the one who laughs, as well as the world, is central to carnival. It’s the “droll aspect, in its gay relativity.” But it’s also ambivalent—it mocks and derides as well as revels in triumph. Comic verbal compositions are also ambivalent. They parody official doctrine but are made humorous. Genres of billingsgate, “familiar speech in the marketplace” connects to abusive language, too.

But playing ugly, while connected to carnival in its most basic sense, doesn’t quite fit the definition of carnival, either. Indeed there are contradictions here. There are visual elements present—the newsletters *The Deliverers* create also act as parodies of more official documents. There is an emphasis on self-deprecation—an understanding that the laughter is directed towards one another in this “second life,” and the abusive language that takes place in play does mock those who are assumed to use it out of play. These do echo carnival well.

But Bakhtin places the mockery, the “second life” in direct opposition to the official. He describes carnival as necessary and renewing. The importance of “grotesque realism is

---

327 Ibid.
328 Ibid., 11.
329 Ibid.
330 Ibid., 12.
331 Ibid., 16-17.
degradation…the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body.” But playing ugly’s ambivalent target is already degraded—playing ugly already plays with the grotesque defiled by the official. Playing ugly derives its power from the very people who Bakhtin says makes up the people who participate. If degradation and debasement “of the higher” is a principle of grotesque realism, playing ugly seeks out “of the lower.” Playing ugly, therefore, could be seen as a corollary of carnival—not an example of it directly.

**Caveat #4: Ugly Is Not Always Cathartic**

Who is catharsis for, though? When is it a release and when is it punishment? What is the payoff for the players who participate? This is the crux. Hans emphasized catharsis as a major component of this play-style. Whenever Franz makes a shockingly racist statement, in response to the chastisement he receives from the rest of the group, he inevitably states “What? You were all thinking it!” But they are the only members who play ugly this way. So how does catharsis function for those not actively playing ugly directly? Does it stem from Franz’s assumption about the rest of us and our hidden ugly selves? Is it safe to censure in this play environment but not outside of it? By role-playing bigotry, does the audience of the performance have a cathartic response when censuring or when turning the role-playing away from the ugliness? Hans’s

---

332 Ibid., 19.

333 Connie has stated numerous times that Franz does not manifest this behavior outside of Saturday nights. It’s as if he “turns it on” just for us. The same can be said for that obnoxious t-shirt.

334 Or does the catharsis stem from an acknowledgement of one’s own racism? Feagin and Vera explore this idea and suggest that for antiracist whites, there is an emotional trigger, an exigence that leads to a self-reflexive acknowledgement of one’s own ugliness. It’s only when they have that grotesque realization that they are able to confront racial injustice actively. See,
understanding of catharsis primarily focused on the ability to perform bad behavior. That he needed his Saturday nights in order to get through the week and that playing ugly was the safety valve. But catharsis isn’t just about taboo play. There is something deeply satisfying about speaking up when playing ugly manifests—as stated, my characters are notorious for never knowing when to keep their mouths shut. It also results in those characters dying quickly. But it feels worth it just to speak out. Just to actively meet ugliness head on and confront it. But for others, catharsis stems from the strategy of circumventing an obstruction. Or it’s solving a riddle. But catharsis is never evenly distributed. Catharsis is not a democratic process.

Comparisons and Common Ground

There are interesting parallels with the ways that the online guild, DotH and the offline group, The Deliverers, process points of view and the “Fragile Pythons” narrative attempts to show this. Both groups juggle multiple characters, multiple participants, and multiple narratives. But the ways in which players talk about their characters is illuminating. The constant shifts in point of view, for example, are a good reminder that players do not over-identify with their characters. Players may refer to first person when in the middle of a quest, but when rehashing to other players, they switch to third. I used second person extensively in this chapter precisely to show how embodiment in role-play can shift depending on context. Like most members of DotH,


335 This attitude is steeped in white privilege, as well. In summarizing Elizabeth Minnich, Peggy McIntosh acknowledges that “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’.” In that racial Vampire campaign, my “black savior” persona, Audre, was designed through a privileged lens. Every action I performed as her, I made thinking that if she just acted this way, got this education, or made these choices, she could make her city a utopia. I, with just a few other vampires, could fix every social problem. Only a vantage point of privilege would think this was even possible. See Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in Rothenberg, White Privilege, 122.
I see my character, Stitche, as completely separate from my real self. She is a tool I use in *WoW*. Riley’s and H***’s references to their other ‘toons also reflect this. So immersion does happen, but it is not primarily through identification. The sociality and trust between players is far more important than whether I identify with the character. But in table-top, the role-playing *is* immersive and is a very different type of experience. The use of first person and second person were intended to show this. When I become a character, when I get *into* the game, it *is* immersive. I actively choose to become something else for awhile.

These distinctions between *WoW* (and every other MMORPG) and table-top in regards to embodiment and immersion are directly tied to the types of role-playing that they encompass. Rene Glas differentiates between two types of role-playing games: the ludic and the representational. Ludic role-playing, such as the kind that takes place in MMORPGs, is far more instrumental “having less to do with acting and more to do with playing/managing a character.”336 Representational role-playing is more akin to table-top gaming. It does involve acting. The “role” in *WoW* is what my character is: a shadow priest tailor and pet battler. It’s what my character can do as a tool, not how I imagine her hopes and desires. And while role-playing in the representational sense does happen, it is far more likely to be segregated in order to not break the illusion.337 The “role” in *Vampire*338 is based on the embodiment of a character and the interactive storytelling performance, so knowing what terrifies my character, knowing what she desires and fears, revolves around knowing her motivations.


337Ibid., 26.

338Even more so that *D&D* which relies heavily on instrumental role-playing as a means of character creation. The “hack and slash” of combat relies on an instrumental approach, whereas *Vampire* shouldn’t rely on the instrumental in order to be immersive.
But the “Fragile Pythons” narrative illustrates other methods of intimacy discussed throughout this dissertation, as well. Not only did the guild chat act as a social connector between players, I wanted to show how quickly the interface disappears when players start talking to each other. The conversations that took place were no different than the conversations that took place during table-top. We talk about the people in our life, our animals, our occupations. If anything, the ludic role-play allows for more sociality. I could easily participate in guild chat, do pet battles, hold private conversations, and still maintain a presence in-game and out-of-game simultaneously. But the minute that game frame gets violated in table-top, whether because of perceived cheating or massive bleed in, that sociality suffers.\(^{339}\) Even the ways in which race and gender components manifest in both games is highlighted. In games like WoW and Vampire, race and clan are essentialized through game design. An ill-bred orc craving violence or a privileged white human speaking for all races (and in essence, making such distinctions as race invisible)—these are found in every city, every interaction with an NPC in WoW. A devilish Lasombre and feral Gangrel—they are meant to be played through an essentialist lens. And players do acknowledge the role that race plays in the interactions between characters, although not necessarily between players. H***’s story about her run-in with a human on her first Horde character hints at this. Playing ugly highlights even more ambivalent

\(^{339}\) Erving Goffman differentiates between play and gaming with gaming understood to encompass more than just the act—gaming involves the “focused gathering” that accompanies the play. In the case of Vampire, the game proper is the play, but the sociality surrounding the play is the gaming encounter. “A play of a game has players; a gaming encounter has participants.” Goffman’s distinction is relevant to the present discussion because he acknowledges that it’s only as a participant (not just a player) that allows the experience to be enjoyable. See Erving Goffman, Encounters (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 16-17.
issues of white privilege, bleed, and gender-play. There are hints of all of this, and the implications of applicability to larger gaming ecologies bleed through, too. But there is a catch.

This narrative is an amalgamation of numerous discussions and events spread out over a year of participant observation. Time is compressed and expanded. Liberties have been taken to change names and add situational elements that do not exist. But all of it, every word, every thought, every self-reflexive (and at times self-pitying) sidebar, is *purposeful*. The split screen of the narrative—that’s a quick visual that pays homage to Huizinga’s magic circle. It’s intended to represent an incomplete boundary—a way to imply spatial differences between online and tabletop RPGs but without losing the added dimension of bleed. The different fonts signal different boundaries, as well. The font of the *WoW* story mirrors the font in-game. The font of the *Vampire* campaign mirrors the font I have always used when writing fiction. The italics is internal dialogue, exposition, self-reflection. The quick line breaks, the long drawn out paragraphs…they mirror the pacing of these game spaces. The intentional spelling mistakes in guild chat. The lack of capitalization—this is the shorthand of guild speak.

The mantra one learns when constructing a narrative: show don’t tell. It’s a cliché, in some ways, and not always possible. A year’s worth of conversations and activities need to be selectively used, selectively organized. So this narrative does not get these play spaces exactly right. There are just too many moments that I was not privy to. I wasn’t invited into that back room to conspire in *Vampire*. I wasn’t on Mumble listening to raid chat. I never went on a raid

---

340 One of the *DotH* characters listed in guild chat, Bitrah, is actually a new character that I created and isn’t in the guild, yet. I added her merely as a place holder to get to the next line of dialogue, which actually did happen in-game. She is the only character listed in the entire dissertation who is not a player I interviewed or played with (and separate from the random names that flashed in the chat bar—anonymously characters of the millions who play). Because the guild chat is a compression of multiple time frames, I created her as a way of getting to the significant line without confusing the rest of the narrative.
with the guild, nor ever experienced the hell of LFR. “Fragile Pythons” can only show so much of the similarities and differences between the intimacies of online and the offline role-playing. But the essence of these game spaces is present. And the privacy of these spaces is, too. And it’s this aspect of the narrative that might resonate for a larger gaming ecology. If intimacy is as important as this dissertation strives to show and if this narrative illustrates how the tools of intimacy function on any given night in-game, then maybe this is why toxic gaming environments foment. The necessity for safety, and an anchor, the necessity for small talk, even the necessity for self-deprecation and absurdity, these are the instruments of intimacy that are required to keep toxicity defanged.

So that is the catch. Playing ugly can be toxic. But it serves a purpose for all of the members who perform it. That isn’t to say it isn’t a deeply ambivalent experience, though. And the fallout is devastating. But the biggest difference between the toxicity of online play and the toxicity in playing ugly is a matter of agency and power. The only way playing ugly can function is if all members agree to the rules. It’s when those rules are violated, most often due to bleed, that the play-mode either self-destructs, or the offender is removed from that intimate play space environment. But bleed might also contribute to the toxic gaming environments so often associated with gaming online. But the targets can have vastly different power caches. Groups like Daughters of the Horde have found a way to harness that power.
CONCLUSION. CONSTRUCTING ELYSIUMS AND PLAYING UGLY

In White Wolf’s table-top RPG, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, Elysium is understood to be a fictional safe zone in-game where vampires—both imagined characters within the story, as well as the players participating, are prohibited from using all vampire abilities within its clarified boundaries. No vampire, while in a city’s Elysium, is allowed to violate the sanctuary that the Elysium provides. It is a neutral playground meant to keep participants safe while still allowing for political intrigue and interaction. Violating the sanctity of an Elysium is met with swift and brutal retribution. They are not, however, designed for permanent inhabitance. Instead, they provide a *temporary* state of safety that only works if all participants agree to the rules. In the fictional world of *Vampire*, Elysiums provide privacy since those vampire clan disciplines that allow for effective spying (including heightened hearing, invisibility, and astral projection) are prohibited. Players assume a position of trust due to these accepted restrictions, as well. While this safe zone is an obvious callback to the mythological Elysian Fields of Greek mythology, Elysiums are not paradise. They are not utopian.

The same can be said for guild life in MMORPGs like *WoW*. Constructing Elysium, as it pertains to the title of this dissertation, encompasses this idea of a temporary safe zone, although the onus falls upon the players to design that safety rather than the game design, proper. Because guild members are trusted to follow the rules, privacy can still be maintained. Because of the interactions between players, allowing for presence as well as vulnerability, players are better prepared to weather the game world outside of those protected borders because they know their Elysium is always there. While guild life in *WoW*, and particularly through a guild like *DotH*, promotes intimacy by way of sociality (and presence, boundary formation, and trust), it does so.

---

through a tempered lens. Due to the spatial distances between players, knowing a fellow player without the benefit of face-to-face interaction, requires a different type of trust in order for these relationships to remain intimate. Hence, the rules of DotH guild life are far more explicit.

Maintaining presence, as well, requires an active balancing between the personal and the public. Using VoIPs such as Ventrilo and Mumble allow players to connect not only with one another, but also to players outside of these private environments. This in turn, allows players a virtual foot in each game space: a voice within the DotH guild and a voice within WoW. By allowing for both, players have an anchor that helps foster resilience. They may switch guilds or maintain memberships in multiple guilds, but just knowing the Elysium is there keeps players invested enough in the game to weather negativity.

These same elements can be present in table-top RPGs—even when playing ugly is present. The rules, the trust, the insistence on privacy…these table-top RPGs require a safe zone free from outside scrutiny within its borders. But there are considerations that need to be acknowledged when playing ugly, too. In table-top RPGs, and particularly through a group like The Deliverers, that trust is by no means easier to achieve. If anything, the maintenance of trust keeps its members even more vulnerable and more susceptible to bleed. In online MMORPGs, guilds are easy to build, join, leave, and die. Memberships are finite and fluid and when players violate guild rules, all it takes is a /guildquit or /guildremove command and the player is gone. But for a table-top RPG group like The Deliverers, the process can be far messier for the players and the game. The strong ties between players help weather adversity, but when that adversity comes from within, other elements of sociality must be present in order to maintain group cohesion.
These same elements of intimacy apply to other players outside of DotH and The Deliverers, as well. Over and over, players described uncomfortable gaming experiences but always in relation to other players. Anchors, advocates, allies—they all helped players build resistance, gain expertise, and derive pleasure from the role-playing experience.

**Friendship as Method**

I interviewed friends, coworkers, guildies, and fellow gaming travelers. Before this dissertation was started, these relationships ran the gamut of intimacy—some were acquaintances, others were allies, and others were so close as to be considered family (with as much dysfunction and love that comes with that). In the initial stages, I did question this approach. At what point does friendship infect qualitative research? Infection. It is an interesting term to use in reference to autoethnography. It implies disease, taint, corruption. It implies that health and purity are attainable processes because of their inverse. This is the burden of participant observation. The very act of participating becomes a vector for...some kind of pathogen. But a weird thing happened once the interviews were completed and the coding began. Listening to their voices, looking for the patterns and the commonalities between their stories, seeing my own self within these contexts…my involvement was not a matter of corruption. I saw myself in their stories. So I became another voice to be reckoned with.

In Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy’s defense of using friendship as a method of qualitative research, she describes it as “open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich,” and argues that the “primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability.”

---

for this dissertation not only because of the nature of who was interviewed, but because she stresses that both the researcher and the participant can gain (and lose) from the experience.

Because I interviewed people I care about and who care about each other, confidentiality within each group was challenging. They discussed the interviews with each other, which then led to further conversations and analyses of the responses...which then led to confidentiality issues outside of the gaming groups. Very few people interviewed kept the interviews to themselves. They spoke freely with one another about my questions and about their responses. They spoke with coworkers, family members, and outside friends about the dissertation. They discussed other people’s interviews and their responses with others, too. Not everyone, of course. Some kept their involvement quiet and that was respected. But the interviewing process opened up something within these players that is in some ways enlightening and in other ways problematic. Not just for me as a researcher, but as a player…and a friend.

I spoke with Ula about her pseudonym, for example. Ula is the name of a favorite character of hers from one of our D&D campaigns—she was a badass Barbarian fighter in woad. When I talked to her about the autoethnographic and friendship methods that I was using in the dissertation, she was concerned. Not for herself or the others—there was anonymity in being named for a favorite character, and therefore protection. But she worried about me. My safety could not be maintained because I cannot be anonymous. I don’t get a pseudonym to protect me from outside scrutiny. I know that it is possible that I will be viewed harshly. The narrative in the previous chapter all but begs for critique of my own self-indulgence, my own privileged appropriations, and my own evolution towards a richer understanding of intersectionality. This method, then, can be transformative because it does take power away from the researcher and puts it in the hands of the researched. This is the reason why the ethics of friendship is crucial to
this methodology. It isn’t just a methodological bag of tricks used to gain trust or increase access. There would be no need for that kind of trick anyway—I am already a part of these gaming worlds. I already have access. Instead, Tillmann-Healy stresses that friendship as method is “a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love…It is a level of investment in participants’ lives that puts field-work relationships on par with the project.” Investment is a key term here. I was invested in some of these relationships before the dissertation and will continue to be invested in these relationships after. But the nature of these relationships will have changed.

I cannot guarantee that the players I interviewed will be perfectly happy with the way that I have interpreted these experiences and using friendship as a method for research was a particularly difficult endeavor. This is particularly true in the narrative components. In an early version of the narrative, I questioned how a reader might view The Deliverers. The portrayals of the group were harsh—Hans seemed more monster than human and Franz just seemed like a jerk, but I had thought that readers would see through the lens of an unreliable narrator, and realize that bleed-in prevented a clearer understanding of the events. But my perception was far different than what I realized was actually coming through. When I showed that early draft to the group (as friendship as method requires), it was met with extreme disapproval. I hurt them. Where I thought I was showing the effects of bleed, and hence the effects of introducing toxicity in a victimizing manner, they saw me attacking them. They said I portrayed them as caricatures—not real people. They saw hate—not love. It was devastating. And while the WoW guild’s portrayals were not as critical, there were questions there, as well. They wondered why I didn’t tell them about my mother’s death. They felt their guild chat came off as immature at times. And I questioned the revision process, as well. Are The Deliverers still portrayed as

---

343 Ibid., 735.
caricatures or are the deep bonds between these players coming through enough? Are the ladies of DotH too perfect? Am I portraying their (our) Elysium as a utopian feminist ideal? It’s not as if there aren’t criticisms of these kinds of guilds. By having strict rules of conduct, guilds that portray themselves as inclusive can end up being even more restrictive and marginalizing. Did I turn a blind eye to behaviors that didn’t fit? And what about the WoW_Ladies posts on envisioned racial connections between character and player? Is it ethical for me to analyze and critique that one post out of hundreds, particularly when members of WoW_Ladies do strive for inclusion and do not draw essentialist conclusions about race in IRL? Does an essentialist fantasy archetype complicate how players think of race? Does it undermine other elements of networking?

I tried to work through these crises and questions as ethically as possible. And friendship cuts both ways. So I ate the criticism. I took the pain I caused The Deliverers and tried to right the wrong. The italicized self-reflections on self-reflections? Those are me channeling The Deliverers’ anger and criticism. That’s me role-playing them perceiving my perception. It is me trying to see what they see. And it is me trying to get closer to understanding my own play-style and the motivations for my version of playing ugly. And that could only happen because the use of friendship as method allows for co-ownership. It would be so easy to just focus on the casual racism, sexism, and taboo play. On the surface, playing ugly is an excuse, an alibi—it’s the reason why strangers are not welcome. But because I know these players, I know the performances are sometimes more than what they seem. I know when Hans is playing an asshole by pushing buttons. I’ve seen him at his worst, both mentally and physically. And they

---

have now seen me at mine. But Tillmann-Healy’s point about the stance of love and justice in friendship as method requires the researcher to question all of these assumptions and to look for what lies hidden behind the bluster and performance. And it’s why friendship as method is so crucial. These friendships are fostered on trust and intimacy, and even though my presence within this group is at an end due to the violations that took place, these friendships may still exist in some form. They are merely changed due to the shift in the gaming boundaries. And that is not a research methodology that should be dismissed as tainted. If anything, the tenets of friendship should be a required component of any qualitative research. It’s painful, but provides rich insights since ownership is a mutually constitutive knowledge construct.

**The Chimera**

In her analysis of role-playing games, Sarah Lynne Bowman focuses heavily on Jungian archetypes to explore character development and psychoanalytic concepts of theory of mind to highlight ways that players use their characters and interactive stories as a means of identity alteration and creative problem solving. She posits, that because a player is able to imagine another person’s pain, identifying with a character persona allows for empathy, and it’s achieved through the natural and not pathologized understanding of disassociation. “If human beings, by nature create alternate selves and the post-modern condition predisposes us to further

---

345 Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 144.

346 Ibid., 57.

347 Ibid., 87.

348 Ibid., 58.
fragment our sense of identity, then role-playing games provide a fascinating outlet for self-expression."

Erving Goffman defines a key as “a set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful…is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying.” In *Encounters*, Goffman argues that role distance allows a performer a way out of the performance—by detachment, a performer can “slip the skin the situation would clothe him in.”

In his understanding of the boundaries between performance, theatre, script, and drama, Richard Schechner envisions each as a concentric ring, a disc, migrating outwards like the rings of a tree trunk. Starting in the center and working outwards, drama is described as the province of the text—in the case of the RPG, it would be the narrative. The script, the next disc and slightly larger, is governed by the mentor—the one who communicates the text between players. Further outward and encompassing even more, is the theatre—the place in which the text is enacted by the players. And finally, encompassing its entirety, is the performance—the most broadest and “ill-defined” of all discs because all elements are present. The audience/players/space/text are merely separated by seams and can be broken, allowing for explorations between those barriers, for good or ill.

---

349 Ibid., 143.

350 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 44.


Each one of these authors highlights a core element of discovery within this dissertation. Bowman’s focus on theory of mind provides a much needed explanation for the ways in which playing ugly operates. If players attempt to embody the Other, is it possible that playing ugly can allow for a clearer empathy for social injustices? Reflecting on my own experiences of attempting to play a black feminist persona, some of the rage I felt in that campaign wasn’t just about *my character* not being heard. It was that feeling of stupid helplessness and injustice associated with it. And the fact that, due to my own white privilege, I had never been placed in that kind of position so explicitly before, *hurt*. Goffman’s understandings of keying and role distance are also applicable. *The Deliverers* understand the implicit rules of playing ugly. Although the performance is not always successful, the intention is to safely explore taboo with the clear understanding that players know the performance does not reflect the real feelings of the player. The persona is not the player. Bleed, however, can affect the ability for role distance and the persona and player sometimes blend too much. And Schechner’s emphasis on the seams that separate drama from the script, the theatre, and the performance highlight the permeability that can take place between each and in so doing, becomes a further acknowledgement of the permeability of Huizinga’s magic circle.

The point of these applications is to stress the interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation. By necessity, I drew upon works housed within various disciplines including sociology, performance studies, (cyber)feminist and gender studies, psychology, media and cultural studies, interpersonal communication, and ethnic studies. Such a chimeric nature allows for a more robust and enlightened understanding of the cultural practices that take place within role-playing communities. Alone, the explanatory power of those discovered themes would be far more limited.
In Greek mythology, the chimera is a fantastical synthesis of serpent, goat, and lion and possesses the most powerful qualities of each, making her stronger than each beast would be separately. Because this dissertation analyzes how these cultural tensions are fomented and resisted within role-playing communities, because it seeks to understand everyday cultural practices in relation and in opposition to the dominant forces within gaming cultures, and because it attempts to locate methods in which other cultural communities might benefit, the image of a chimera works well as a metaphor that illuminates the hybrid nature of this project.

This project contributes to game studies and cyberfeminism not only because of the ways in which it analyzes methods of resistance, but because it seeks it to interrogate those power structures that contribute to that resistance. As I have stressed in this dissertation, the methods I have employed are political. Not only for how to discover and bear witness, but to interpret and to communicate that interpretation in a way that allows for growth, justice, and love. There is an agenda here and to not acknowledge that misses the point. Methods of intimacy, methods of friendship, can be transformative for players and researchers and participants outside of the immediate community. These methods of intimacy, these possible tools of resistance and identity formation and cultural production, should be analyzed through additional lenses, additional disciplines, and additional toolkits. This dissertation is just one small thread of a much needed cultural story.

**Limitations and Future Research Lenses**

This dissertation only touched upon intersectionality. All of the players I interviewed were white. They ranged in socioeconomic class, but could still afford to consume and participate in RPGs that require internet connections, costly hardware, expensive software, and monthly

---

353 Hesiod, *Theogony* 319-324.
subscription fees. Maintaining a gaming life is expensive, but the players I interviewed were still privileged enough to accommodate the cost (and possibly at the expense of other areas of their lives). Gender identity and sexual orientations also ran the gamut. Indeed, when I spoke with one DotH member and asked about guild demographics, she emphasized that age and orientation were two of the most diverse elements within the guild. In the year that I have witnessed, race has never been mentioned—whether through self-identification or through guild chat conversations concerning non-guild behaviors or concerning IRL. It’s absent and the interviews reflected this absence. Future research into role-playing games should make a far more concerted effort at intersectionality because there are voices that are still unheard—stories that have gone unnoticed and invisible.

And there are other lenses that could make this web of stories even richer. One theme that emerged within the interview process involved the role of disability and the ways in which players used role-playing games as a means of identity exploration outside of their own embodied experiences. This relates to issues of ageism, as well. Because there has been an emerging trend in game design that emphasizes twitch gameplay—a style that tests a player’s reaction time and emphasizes physical speed and manual dexterity, older gamers used to turn-based gameplay, as well as players with slower reaction times due to physical limitations, can become even more marginalized and rendered invisible. And while some MMORPGs do have game design elements that have accessibility and accommodation options,354 guilds are still mostly maintained by players who assume an able-bodied presence. But as there are all-female

354 There are player made modifications for WoW that allow players to change the size and color of icons and action bars on the UI screen. Such addons as Tidy Plates and Bartender are popular ones. See “World of Warcraft Addons,” Curse, accessed April 20, 2015, http://www.curse.com/addons/wow.
guilds like DotH and networking hubs like Wow_Ladies, there are WoW guilds who are
disability friendly including Die Safe\textsuperscript{355} as well as networking and support sites like
http://www.ablegamers.com/. Indeed, where recruiting on WoW forums for a female-only guild
is often met with toxicity, discussions of disability are extensive and are predominantly
supportive. Present research is looking at the ways in which gamers with disabilities play,\textsuperscript{356} but
future research could look more extensively at why these attitudes are so wildly different.

And there are definite game genre issues that need to be addressed, as well. This dissertation
focused primarily on fantasy role-playing games and the ways in which gaming communities
foster intimacy. I did not focus on PvP environments, eSports, first-person shooters, card-based
games, or MMOs outside of a fantasy-based narrative structure. Methods of intimacy may not
work the same way outside of the RPGs I analyzed. Other factors of sociality may be at work,
other types of resistance may also be present, and other methods of networking might be
available to players who are assumed to be outside of the target demographic.

**Final Thoughts, Final Considerations**

There are tensions presented within and without, and we do have to be careful not to make
these safe spaces speak for every marginalized player—especially when they don’t frame their
experiences this way.\textsuperscript{357} There are missing voices, missing stories. One consideration that does

\textsuperscript{355} Lisa Poisso, “"Guide dog" player and guild embrace sightless guildmate, steer team to
player-and-guild-embrace-sightless-guildmate-steer/.

\textsuperscript{356} Theodore Lim and Bonnie Nardi, “A Study of Raiders with Disabilities in World of
Warcraft,” FDG’11, June 29-July 1, 2011, Bordeaux, France, accessed April 20, 2015,

\textsuperscript{357} Valerie Aurora, “Breaking the Unicorn Law: Stop asking women in open tech/culture
about women in open tech/culture,” *Ada Initiative*, last modified March 10, 2014,
https://adainitiative.org/2014/03/breaking-the-unicorn-law-stop-asking-women-in-open-
techculture-about-women-in-open-techtulture/.
need to be addressed here, though, is that while these stories are limited—20 participants in a vast base of millions can only suggest so much, they do resonate. So utopian is not the right adjective that should be used. Hopeful is closer.

*Daughters of the Horde* is celebrating their ten year guild anniversary this year. The celebration has already started in-game and on Facebook. Raids, modding contests, virtual food, music, dancing…it’s a milestone that acknowledges how strong the ties are between its members.

In *The Deliverers*, Patty’s campaign ruptured. It ended with the blowup. But an interesting thing happened in the process. Because Patty’s boyfriend has joined the group, there is now a new balanced group dynamic—complete with anchors and advocates and the bonds between its members have actually strengthened due to their painful involvement in the dissertation revision process. *This* is what they get out of this entire endeavor—a slightly modified form of *The Deliverers*, but an intact group, none-the-less. No matter how stressful playing ugly is, the relationships are still there. The intimacy will eventually win out over bleed, even if my own participation in *The Deliverers* is at an end. Understanding these intimacies, these hopes, and these friendships are what keep the monsters at bay. Even when those monsters are ourselves.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Beyer, Jessica L. “Women’s (Dis)embodied Engagement with Male-Dominated Online Communities.” In Gajjala and Oh, Cyberfeminism 2.0, 153-170.


Waern, Annika. “‘I’m in love with someone that doesn’t exist!’ Bleed in the context of a computer game.” *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 3, no. 2 (2011): 239-257.

Computers & Applied Sciences Complete doi: 10.1386/jgvw.3.3.239_1.


APPENDIX A.

DATE: December 9, 2013

TO: Genesis Downey

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [538357-3] The Role of Mentors in Online Role Playing Games: Developing Best Practices

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: December 9, 2013

EXPIRATION DATE: November 13, 2014

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 100 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 13, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board’s records.
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: The Role of Mentors in Online Role Playing Games: Developing Best Practices

INTRODUCTION: You are invited to participate in a research study about the role of mentors in online role playing games conducted by Genesis Marie Downey, from the American Culture Studies Program at Bowling Green State University. Your participation in this research will contribute to a doctoral dissertation seeking to understand the role of mentors in gaming communities. I try to understand how the mentor can guide and foster social bonds between players in order to develop best practices as part of my larger research project. You were identified as a possible volunteer in the study because you identify as a person who plays role playing games.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to develop best practices for mentoring young gamers based on an understanding of how participants socialize in role playing gaming environments (RPGs). To this end, the study will highlight how the social ties within gaming communities impact gamer participation and inclusion.

PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES: Potential participants will be fully informed of all procedures and activities before signing the consent form.

I will conduct a one-on-one interview with you that will take about one-hour. During this interview, I will ask you about your playing experiences and the ways in which your gaming community impacts those experiences. This interview is open in that whatever you feel important to reveal about your perspective. We will conduct the interview in an agreed upon location that allows for your level of comfort and access. Interviews may take place electronically via Skype or other similar online communication tools. I will record the interviews with two audio-recording devices and one video recording device (the video-recording will only be used for electronic interviews conducted through Skype or other similar online communication tools). These interviews will only be listened to and viewed by me and will remain locked in my residence to maintain your confidentiality. After I transcribe the recordings and complete the analysis, they will be erased to further ensure confidentiality.

You will also be asked to grant permission to allow me to observe you while you play in a location decided by you. The context is up to you – it may be in an online guild event, group quest participation, or observation of the land based game experience (if applicable). The observations will last for as long as you deem comfortable—from an hour, to several hours, or multiple days and times of activities. I will start and stop observations at your request. All notes of observations that I make will be sent to you before I write up my analysis so that you are aware of what I have recorded and noted. You can then add or correct any of my observations. Since some employers may use tracking software, you may want to complete any online component of the study on a personal computer. You will not want to leave any online component open if using a public computer or a computer others may have access to, and you will want to clear your browser cache and page history after completing the online component of the study (if applicable). If you are not comfortable with this component of the study, you are free to only participate in the interview.
After I have gathered my data and have made my analysis of the study, I will share the transcript of our interview, field notes, and summary with you so that you can correct, clarify, or delete parts of it as you see fit. This will be done before the work goes into publication. I want your story and I want to understand it correctly.

There are no direct monetary incentives associated with this study. However, you will be contributing to a greater understanding how gamers maintain social ties, the roles that those social bonds play in fostering group identity, and how mentors can develop best practices in guiding novice players and continuing players through difficult situations.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS: Risk of participation is not greater than that experienced in daily life.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY: You will benefit from this study by being able to voice your opinion of what it means to be a gamer and play role playing games. Too often, the voices that have been missing the most from this cultural conversation are the ones who actually play these games and have a vested interest in these environments. Because mentoring can be a critical component in the learning process, I want to know how your own gaming experiences have shaped the way that you participate in RPGs. This study will be a great way to get your voice out there and understood.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your name will be changed so that you may remain anonymous throughout the research report. All audio-recordings, transcriptions of those recordings, field notes, and transcriptions of the field notes will be locked at my personal residence and will remain on a computer only accessible to me. The files will be erased at the completion of the study. The transcripts will be kept with the researcher in a safe after the study under a coding scheme which will not reveal your identity.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions (or not do a particular task) or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you decide to participate or not, it will have no affect on your relationship with Bowling Green State University or with me as an employee of the University. Similarly, if you are a student in a class I am teaching, your grades will not be impacted. Risks associated with sharing your stories with me are no greater than those encountered in daily life. However, if you should feel there is any form of risk – you are free to decline participation. Furthermore, your decision to participate or not participate will not have any impact with your gaming community—your identity will remain confidential even to other community members within your community. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. If you volunteer to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS AND REVIEW BOARD: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact: Genesis Downey at d genesis@bgsu.edu, 567 661-7071 or Radhika Gajjala (faculty sponsor) at radhik@bgsu.edu, 419 372-0586. If you have other concerns or questions
regarding participant rights, contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University at 419 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

_____________________________________  ______________________________________
Participant Signature      Date
APPENDIX C.

The Role of Mentors in Online Role Playing Games: Developing Best Practices:

Questionnaire

The participants will be asked the following interview questions:

1. What kinds of coaches have you had in the past? Were they positive or negative experiences? Can you describe a memorable early experience with that coach?

2. How long have you been playing role playing games whether online or offline?

3. How would you define a role playing game?

4. How would you define a gamer? Do you consider yourself a gamer? Why or why not?

5. What drew you to the game you are presently playing? Are there other games you play?

6. How long have you been a member of your present gaming community?

7. What qualities were you looking for when you joined?

8. Describe the things you like about the present gaming community that you may or may not have experienced before.

9. What about the challenges? What kinds of negative experiences have you had—whether inside the gaming community or as a result of your membership in this specific gaming community?

10. How much time do you devote to gaming in a week in general?

11. If you could change anything about the game you are presently playing—whether in the game play, the socialization, or the technology capabilities, what would you change?
12. Have there been times where you thought of quitting this game? Can you describe the events? What caused you to stay?

13. What would drive you away from playing the game?

14. How do you learn game strategies? Is there a specific player who teaches new players or do multiple players help coach these new players? What other resources besides players help with this learning process?

15. Describe a memorable gaming event—whether positive or negative. Why do you think the event had that result?

16. What kinds of technologies are used in preparation for the game, during the game, or after the game—how important are those technologies?