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The Way We Play: Exploring the specifics of formation, action and competition in digital gameplay among World of Warcraft raiders

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The Way We Play:

Exploring the specifics of formation, action and competition
in digital gameplay among *World of Warcraft* raiders

by T. Ladan Cockshut

This thesis explores the specific practices of group gameplay (called 'raiding') in the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMO). In particular, it presents ethnographic research conducted by the author between 2009 and 2012 where she studied raiding in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, a game environment that is a complicated and malleable space with many pathways of play built into it, not the least of which are the particular ways that raiders choose to shape and sustain their play experience. Building on Galloway's 'four moments of gamic action' as a theoretical framework from which to consider gamic representation among raiders and through ethnographic research on raiding gameplay practices, this thesis considers the ways that formation, competition and gamic action have distinguished raiding within the online, persistent game environment, forming to become a set of interwoven principles that work in concert to sustain long-term raiding activity. The objective of this thesis is twofold: first, to contribute to the gap in games research on raiding gameplay practices in MMOs; and second, to consider how the study of online group play through the context of MMO raiding can impact further geographical research into the digital game, particularly within the contexts of the virtual and playful. Conclusions drawn from this work suggest that the study of game raiding (and its persistence) offers an important perspective to understanding the nature of the complex online game environment; an environment that is at once controlled and malleable, multisensory and immersive, engaging yet sustaining, and complex yet localized, creating many simultaneous moments in gamic action where these representations of space, action, formation and competition function not so much to define gameplay but more so to shape and enable it.

The Way We Play:

Exploring the specifics of

formation, action and competition

in digital gameplay among

World of Warcraft raiders

T. Ladan Cockshut

Submission for Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Geography
Durham University
2012

Declarations

The material contained in the thesis has not previously been
submitted for a degree in this or any other institution. It is the sole work of
the author, who takes full responsibility for any errors contained.

For Chase

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Chapter 7

Note: These audio recordings and video footage are included on the DVD that is attached to this thesis. Due to the variation in video and audio sources and capture, there may be differences in the quality of audio or video. While the videos can be viewable as a DVD, they can also be viewed as individual files on the DVD (by opening the DVD drive).

Acknowledgements

I know there's that proverb that says it takes a village to raise a child. I think it takes an overpopulated city to raise a PhD student. Over the past several years, I have benefited from the support, wisdom and encouragement of many from all spheres of my life to help me get through the bumps in the road and reach this point. I thought I could be cheeky and just offer a big thank you to everyone. But that's honestly not as satisfying as getting to name names and their special impact on me over these several years.

First and foremost, the sincerest expression of gratitude and appreciation is extended to my academic supervisors, Ben Anderson, Kathrin Hörschelmann and Marcus Power. Words will never adequately capture how fortunate I have been to be supervised by three such capable academics and mentors. Ben always seemed to know the right questions to ask and feedback to give to improve the quality of my work and his selfless dedication to all those he supervises comes through in his enthusiastic willingness to work with you no matter how unsure you might be about your own work. Even though Kathrin had to be away for a significant portion of my thesis (doing very important things!), her presence was always felt and her warm encouragement, insight and feedback, particularly in the earliest and latest stages of the doctorate, have been invaluable to me. Marcus has been a constant source of encouragement, wisdom, and calm during my thesis, providing me with important insight into the work, always offering recommendations about ways to strengthen my arguments or research approach and reminding me to keep a healthy life-work balance. It's not hyperbole when I say that I could not

have gotten this far without them and I'll be forever grateful for the example they've provided on how to be exceptional academics and supervisors. But of course, since this is a thesis about playful things, I can't resist being a bit playful here as I immortalise my supervisors as iconic 'raid bosses' in WoW. By day, mild-mannered academics; by night:

Ben "Ragnaros the Firelord" Anderson, Reader in Geography
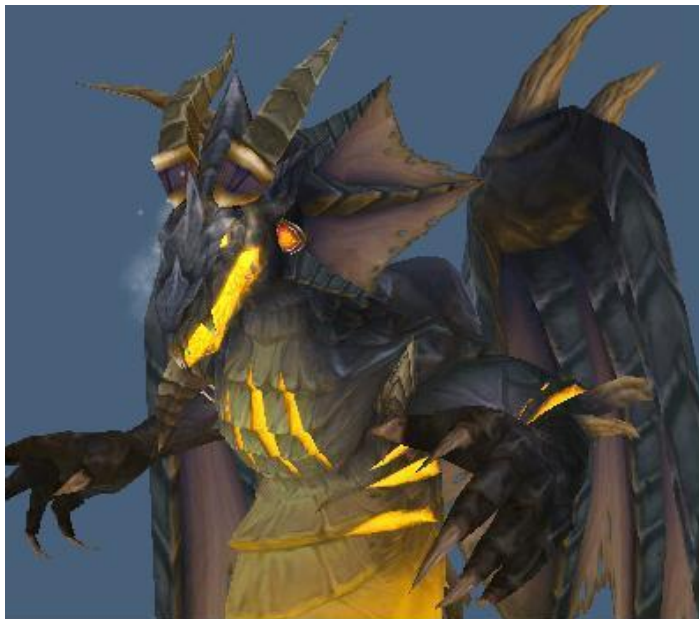
Kathrin "Lady Sinestra" Hörschelmann, Senior Lecturer in Geography

Marcus "Professor Putricide" Power, Professor in Geography

Kelly, Mark Townley, Jeff Warburton, and Jon Warren. I have loved every moment in the department and am so proud of having this wonderful opportunity to pursue my doctoral studies at such a fine university. I want to also mention the support I have received from Josephine Butler College over the course of my PhD and to specifically thank Jill Tidmarsh and Anne-Marie Einhaus for the exemplary assistance they facilitated during the final year of my study. I also thank Mark Ward from the BBC for showing a genuine interest in the practices of raiding and writing about the community (and providing me invaluable opportunities to contribute) with such integrity and interest. I also offer my sincere thanks to some fellow students (and friends) who helped me locate articles or research materials that eluded me along the way: Pekka Aaltonen, Maarten Heinz, Johan Järvinen and Nils Röthemeier. You exemplify collegiality in its finest form. And most importantly, my warm appreciation is extended to Alex Watson for offering so much of her time and support in helping me get my research blog designed and launched and providing much appreciated technical support over these years when I ran into glitches I could not solve (you're a national treasure!).

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An extra dose of chocolate, cake and love goes out to some extraordinary women (and academic powerhouses!) without whose love and support I might not have gotten this far: Anne, Cat, Emma (and Simon), Jenny and Stella. Just... thank you. Being a single mother while in fulltime studies requires that you learn how to

And now I turn to that bedrock of my life: my family. Mum, you were the one who first encouraged me to do this degree and you were always the voice in my head reminding me to not give up even when life's difficulties were overwhelming me. Dad, you helped clear the way in so many ways for me to not only get started but also to keep going. I can honestly say, without a hint of hyperbole, that I could not have done this degree without both of you. I am proud that you're my parents and will be forever grateful for your help in achieving this goal. Many thanks go to Laili, my amazing sister, and David, Sam and Sarah, for just being there for both me and Chase in so many ways during this period of time. I am not sure I can ever repay the kindnesses and support you've given me but I'll certainly try! A special mention goes to Olli, who while being a relative newcomer to my life has offered so much support and encouragement, helping me get through probably the most stressful and enriching period of my life.

And finally, and above all, my thanks go to my darling boy, my Chase. I think it's rare that a mother gets to publicly thank her child. He's been through a lot during this time: the hardships of separation caused by moving, starting a new school, coping with his health needs, accepting that his mother spent way too much time staring at (and talking to) a computer screen, and the other challenges that he's had to endure in a single-parent household. But throughout he's been helpful, adaptable, full of humour, understanding, and marvellous—a real example to me. If I've taught him anything through this, I hope it's to always try your best and never give up, no matter how hard things might get. Thank you, Chase, for being **my best friend** as we collected a cat, two guinea pigs, a snail, a telescope, a hundred Nerf guns, a mountain of Lego, the ugliest chair in the world and some amazing memories.

—Ladan Cockshut
November 2012

Chapter 1:

Thesis introduction and overview

... the big trend in video gaming is to take games online: Other players are a far richer source of complex patterns than a computer can be. Game-playing as a solitary activity is a historical aberration made possible by computers and rendered less necessary by connectivity. —Raph Koster, game designer, 2005

The medium will evolve and how we do it might change but the principles won't. Ultimately it's about connecting with people and interacting so we can play together. —Grafarian, guild leader, US-guild vodka, 2012

In an online game, players find it rewarding to save the world. They find it more rewarding to save the world together, with lots of other people. —excerpt from *The Laws of Online World Design,* 2012

Introduction

When I tell a new acquaintance that I am conducting doctoral research into online gaming worlds I often get one of a few specific responses. At times some seem amused or curious about it, while others had a story to tell me. They knew a friend who had ruined his relationship from gaming too much; they knew a

teenager who 'just stares like a zombie at the computer screen and won't go outside'; or they had read about some 'poor gamer' who'd died from playing games nonstop for 60 hours. Some would go so far as to suggest that my research agenda should be solving what they saw as the alarming trend in digital games for encouraging time wasting, unhealthy, violent or anti-social behaviour. With that presumption came a dubiousness about what could possibly be learned about concepts like playing together or group dynamics through studying an online digital game. Weren't all games solitary experiences of play that strip away our desire to connect? Weren't they just a distraction from the work of *real life*? As the work presented in this thesis will illustrate, digital games are not necessarily solitary or void of connection, nor are they bereft of an ability to tell us something about how we sustain excellence in the pursuits in life, even if those pursuits are of a playful nature.

There are many levels of nuanced understanding and engagement within the digital game. The digital game itself is played on different technologies, platforms, and formats. Even its narrative and gameplay style varies. In the case of the game and type of gamer I have studied, it is defined by an approach to play through certain specific concepts, primarily drawn through how it shapes the experience of playing in groups in a game environment designed to never end. But why study the gamic practices of raiding? What can its study contribute to the body of research on digital games and human geography that previous studies into the digital game have not? I argue that it is the way in which raiding shapes its approach to formation, action and competition to sustain long-term group play in a persistent game environment that can provide a further nuanced understanding of the scope of the digital game and expand the potentialities of engagement in its study. It is, at its core, a gamic experience that is defined by, in Grafarian's words above, 'connecting with people' and a manifestation of the logical evolution in the digital game that, as Raph Koster notes, had perhaps been previously defined as a 'solitary activity as made possible by computers' that has been due to further shifts toward the online been 'rendered less necessary by connectivity'. Above all, it holds the promise of the diegetically rewarding experience of 'saving the world',

but not doing it in isolation—doing it with 'lots of other people' as the Laws of Online World Design (Koster, 2012) suggests.

To illustrate the distinctive nature of 'connectivity' as represented by raiders (the term used to describe gamers who primarily engage in raiding gameplay) I have included an audio clipping made by a raiding group (typically called guilds) called Paragon at the moment it first killed the Lich King—the first raiding guild to do so in the world. In 2010, at the time of the recording, the Lich King was regarded the game's most challenging foe (what are commonly referred to as 'raid bosses') from the hardest raiding area in the game at the time. (See recording 1-1, included on the DVD portion of this thesis[1].) This recording represents a well-known example[2] of what is commonly (and amusingly) referred to as a 'nerdscream' amongst gamers. A nerdscream in raiding is the often jubilant, at-times cacophonous celebrating emitted simultaneously by the entire raid group (up to 25 voices at once) and it often erupts at the very moment a group first succeeds at a game raiding encounter. This clip is significant in how it captures, in its raw, unrehearsed nature, the intense groupwide emotional reactions that can often result from success achieved through this form of group play. In the case of this 'nerdscream', Paragon is a Finnish-language guild and so the reactions are in Finnish. I think the fact that this 'nerdscream' is in a language that I, as the listener, cannot understand makes it a particularly compelling example of this kind of group-wide celebration. While I am unable to fully understand what is being said, I can still draw out the emotional expression of the nerdscream itself. A consideration of Paragon's intense, shared reaction to succeeding at a challenge that had taken them 42 (elapsed) days to accomplish provides an excellent

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[1] Throughout this thesis are samples of audio and video footage that are integral to the work. Their inclusion is intended to better illustrate points or concepts raised in the thesis. For ease of location, the items provided on the DVD are referenced in the work as either *Recording* or *Video,* and are also denoted by chapter number and location. The list of recordings and video included on the DVD is also listed in the List of Videos and Recordings on pages ix–x. Any URLs listed with a figure, video or recording can also be used for viewing purposes (via YouTube).

[2] To appreciate the popularity of this 'nerdscream' one need only note that when Paragon excerpted the nerdscream audio footage from the kill video and put it up on YouTube, there have been over 350,000 views since it was first uploaded (this is in addition to the over 1 million views of the actual kill video itself).

argument for the *connected nature of raiding,* an experience that—at least according to Koster—we were always meant to have in gameplay.
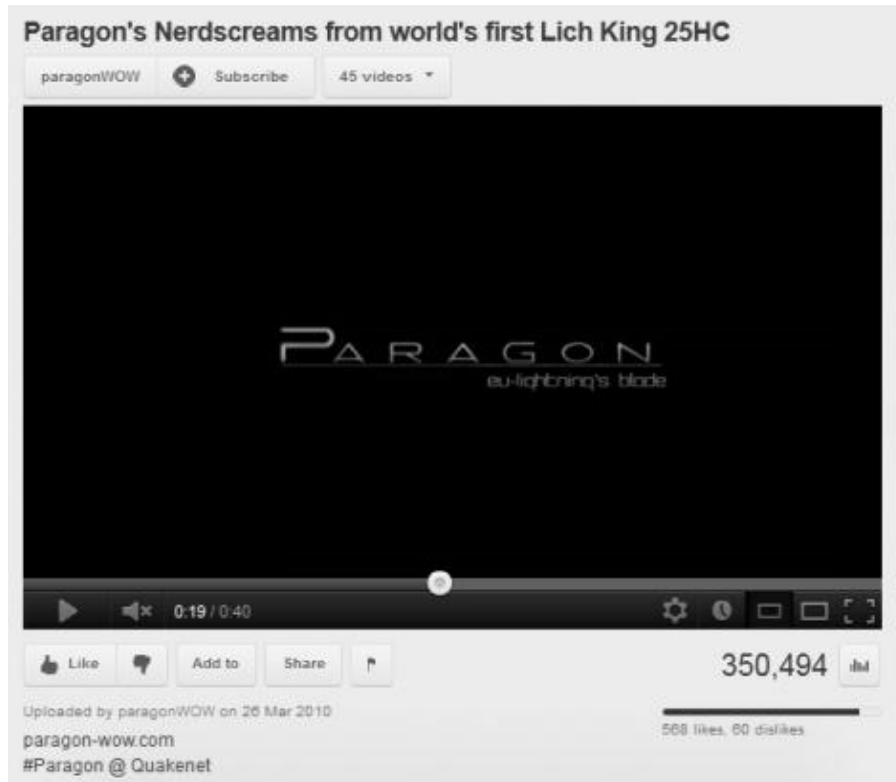
Recording 1-1. 'Nerdscream' audio recording from Paragon's world first boss kill, March 2010. *Source:* Paragon, 2010. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skOEwp8qi88&feature =relmfu. Last accessed November 24, 2012.)

This thesis is a study in the practice of raiding in the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMO[3]). The research is located in the game *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and portrays the specific ways that formation, competition and gamic action function in raiding, particularly when considering how raiders shape their gamic actions to sustain long-term play in the online, persistent game environment. Tracing raiders through their formation and enactment of certain values and their experiences with, in varied ways, certain gamic action is the primary goal of this thesis. This research is focused on the practices of raiding in WoW because the complexity inherent in large-scale group play provides a

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[3] In this thesis, for the sake of brevity I will refer to the so-called massively multiplayer online roleplaying game as an MMO rather than using its full acronym, MMORPG.

compelling way to explore the nature of gamic action in the persistent game environment. The specificities of certain raider-identified core values in the community—namely competition, formation, and action—are mapped across the web of raiding and will be delineated in specific detail throughout the empirical analysis of this work. The thesis draws on ethnographic work conducted with raiding groups throughout the period of this doctorate's research and aims to propose a nuanced understanding of the nature and scope of gamic action in raiding and frame its distinctive nature within the digital game. The objective of this thesis is twofold: first to contribute to the noticeable gap in the research done to date on raiding in MMOs by studying the scope of its formation, action and competition, particularly through the lens of Galloway's (2006: 8) 'four moments of gamic action'; and second to consider how this form group play is shaped to sustain a long-term gamic engagement in the online (and virtual) game environment—a place where the game can, potentially, never end—and how its study informs not only the broader context of the digital game but also how it impacts further geographical research into the digital game and its related contributions to extant research around subcultures; sports studies; and the material/immaterial.

How I learned to raid...

My position in this work comes from a place of familiarity, having been an experienced gamer and raider in WoW before commencing my research, and thus much of the work in this thesis has been shaped by this positionality. So it seems only fitting that I now contextualise my own rationale for following this line of academic research.

Every story begins somewhere. In the case of this thesis, its story really began when I started playing WoW in 2006, a few years before conducting the doctoral research that comprises this work. The majority of my background in gaming until this point had been in text-based (and non-graphical) multiuser dungeons (MUDs), widely regarded the precursors to MMOs. Before WoW, I had been familiar with other MMOs but I was content to play in an environment I already

knew; an environment I had been drawn to not from a prior experience with gaming but more with an association with literature. A MUD, for me, was more like a 'living book' that permitted the player—through roleplaying and textual contributions—to add and shape the ongoing storyline; I was concerned that playing a game that seemed more about graphics than the story might not be a fit for me. But with a few friends encouraging me, I decided to try it. I found play in an MMO easier to grasp at first than a MUD, at least once you master the basics of movement. With a MUD it is a one-dimensional, textually driven game that requires an orientation toward 'reading the space' versus the ability to 'see the space' that an MMO provides. MMO space was largely navigable and accessible as well. Once my friend showed me the basics of moving around, completing a quest, and how to fight the game-generated foes (something I'd later learn was called a 'mob'), I could play an MMO.

Games theorist Jesper Juul (2009) has referred to games like WoW as being easy to learn but difficult to master, meaning that the basic mechanics and goals of the game may be straightforward and easy to grasp but the best way to master the game are far less so. This orientation toward mastery is largely due to the fact that the game is persistent in nature: it never ends (at least not yet). I would say my experience resonated with this idea. While I knew how to move around, complete quests, kill mobs, and do it over and over again, I suddenly learned there was far more for me to learn about and navigate, all of which sounded like weird-English recast in a new dialect: professions; added spells/abilities, new places to find (many games have a blank map until the player discovers the area for the first time [Lammes, 2008]), specializations for my character, more items to find, buy, or wear, and something called a 'dungeon' to navigate, particularly an ominous sounding place called 'Dead Mines' that I had heard mention of on the gamewide chat channel. Why anyone would willingly want to spend time (again and again, it seemed, by the frequency with which players kept asking for others to join their groups) in a place associated with death, darkness and the depths of the earth was beyond me. Plus, until that point, I'd not really participated in group play. Sure I'd teamed up with a fellow player to complete a quest or two together, and I'd had the odd friendly conversation here and there as I encountered random players,

but group play, particularly these '5-player dungeons' of which Dead Mines was one, was unknown to me. By the time I was level 15 (six weeks after I started playing), the whispers[4] started to stream in for me to help heal in Dead Mines: 'Pls will u join my group for DM? Need healer', I would be asked by some random player who had noticed I was a priest (and thus able to heal). At first I said no. At that point I only knew how to heal myself and maybe one additional player; I had no idea how to handle five of us at once. I knew no one who could teach me and I was terrified of failing. Perhaps I felt I had an inadequate gamic background or a lack of experience. As the friend who introduced me to this game had stopped playing due to work commitments, I now had to decide if I wanted to keep playing on my own but within a more limited framework of gameplay options or take a leap to learn about group play by enduring what I expected would be a series of failures. Finally thanks to the diligent persuasion of a player, I decided to give it a try once he understood (and accepted) that this was my first foray into group play.

The outcome of this first *group run* was that I was terrible. In gamer (and now a more widely used colloquialism) terms, I was an 'epic fail'. I singlehandedly caused the group's death twice due to my own lack of experience and awareness. I could barely see past the visual action on my screen to know which spell to cast on my teammates. The other players tried to advise me on what to do, but I was so anxious and confused that I rarely responded fast enough. Somehow we made it through the dungeon, however, and the group was remarkably nice about it, making jokes and telling me not to worry about it (we all have to start somewhere, one said as I recall). They had fun together and did not seem particularly devastated by these moments of failure along the way. If anything, my ability to admit to and learn from my mistakes appeared to garner a bit of respect from these players. They even asked if they could add me to their friend list and invite me on future group runs. I was heartened and a little surprised. I came away from that experience with an idea that group play was a complicated yet fulfilling series of actions and responses that required both an awareness of one's

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[4] Whispers are a private, player-to-player form of communicating across the WoW game environment. So even though the word suggests a kind of intimacy of interaction (with someone whispering in your ear), they could, in fact, be the equivalent of 500 miles away.

own actions, the actions of one's teammates, and the actions of the game around you. It also expected knowledge and a degree of expertise in gamic actions themselves.

I'll admit to feeling a growing degree of self-confidence. So I tried again—with a different group. These guys were less patient, less conversational, and far less impressed with my still existent learning curve. Imagine my confusion when I found myself removed from the group after we had all died, without an explanation either. And there were no requests to add me to their friends' lists. My failure (though less significant than that first group run) was too great in their eyes to allow me to remain grouped with them. But I didn't give up. Eventually I met other players, spent more time doing group activities, and improved significantly. I even eventually found myself joining a guild (a social group) to have an in-game affiliation with players so I could socialise with others while I levelled up my character. While the scope and nature of gameplay had changed from my MUD playing days where gaming was more about roleplaying, the interactive elements felt remarkably similar. By this time (about 6 months after starting to play) I was aware that some gamers engaged in large group play called raiding. This seemed the purview of the most organised and dedicated players all engaged in group play that was massive in scale (with raids for as many as 40 players). These raiders appeared larger than life to me. I saw them around the game, riding by on their massive mounts and sparkling in their very elaborate armour.

A friend encouraged me to start raiding so I decided to give it a try. I approached a new guild that was raiding and they asked me to do an in-game demonstration of my ability to play my character (mostly to see if I could function in a group). I passed their test and they invited me to join them. Playing in a raid in comparison to 5-player group play was a bit like the difference between cooking dinner for four as compared to cooking for 30. Of course the ingredients are often the same, and you will use similar tools to prepare and cook those ingredients, but the way in which you approach the cooking and the execution of the task is transformed

into a far more complicated and error-prone experience. Raiding felt like an elevated, progressed experience in play, drawing on all elements that an MMO could offer while providing experiences that the individual elements of an MMO could not do on its own. By the time I was prepared for raiding it was already the summer of 2007. Some expectations were laid out for me as a new raider, more than I'd ever experienced as a solo player or as a small group player. My skills were expected to be at a certain level; I had to make sure I was wearing the best gear possible (to maximise my damage); I was expected to learn and understand the raiding area and fights involved. I had to have certain technology available such as a headset and microphone so I could hear and contribute to the planning and execution of raiding with my other 24 raiders. Even my gamespace and in-game screen needed to transform, with new software (much akin to apps on a smartphone) to improve my performance and inform me of any shifts and changes during the raiding experience. My schedule was also impacted—I was expected to be available and reliable at specific set times during the week.

The raiding guild I had joined expected me to participate in raids 3 times a week. My first raid was, in my typical pattern, a less than stellar performance. My raid leaders expected this, however, and had designated another raider to give me feedback and suggest improvements. I learned quickly and while my performance was not as good as the others at least I was not making huge mistakes. From the summer of 2007 I was now a raider, not only a solo or small group player. These components of gamic action were still enveloped within me, but I had prioritised my playing time to raiding activity instead of solo playing. All of this time I was spending with my fellow raiders deepened the social experience of play, as well. In the midst of this explosion of new social and gaming experiences, I was noticing that my perception of an MMO had changed.

At this point, I was well aware (and probably more sensitive to it due to my own establishment as a gamer) of the media's portrayal (sometimes fuelled by certain studies into gamers and gamer behaviours) of gaming. Gaming was deemed an aggression-inducing, anti-social, and health-impairing activity that was dulling

the minds of children and youth and stunting their ability to relate and connect with each other. We rarely saw any discussion of gaming having a positive effect and for many, gaming was something that one might sheepishly admit to doing. While I, having a front seat at the experience of gaming myself, did notice times when the immersive experiences of online gameplay could make it easy for a player to avoid other aspects of his or her life with which he was struggling to cope, I also saw its persistence as a community-sustaining, skill-building enterprise. Despite my own misgivings before I began engaging with an MMO, I was quick to find that my very existence and perpetuation in a persistent game environment meant that I was required to socialise and connect with other players in an on-going manner and that I was expected to improve my performance and skill set for gaming. A specific set of gamic competencies and a degree of social reciprocity were expected of me. As a result, I could see a pattern of practices and values that seemed to frame this approach to gamic action. But an engagement in this form of play and its intersection between notions of the group, the online space and play has been underrepresented in both the media and in academic fields of study to date, particularly when looking at the ways in which geography as a field has (and has not) engaged with the experiences of play and gaming. This has resulted in my desire to document and trace the experiences of play within the framework of the specifics of raiding as a way of enunciating the core features of a game that is shaped by the way it enables persistent play.

Thesis context

Despite the digital game's provenance spanning back to the middle of the 20th century, its academic study is often still described as being in its earliest stages (for example, Aarseth, 2001; Squire, 2002; Tavinor, 2008; Lowood, 2009; Fernández-Vara *et al.,* 2009). Contributions to its study in the early 1980s were typified, for example, by studies into children's and adolescent motor skills, emotional and spatial development in relation to video games use (Gibb *et al*, 1983; Greenfield, 1983, 1984; Dominick, 1984; Dorval and Pepin, 1986; Greenfield *et al,* 1994) or research around the experience of human-computer mediated interaction and digital games (a fine example would be Sherry Turkle's 1984 work

on video games in *Second Self*). As the study into the digital game has continued to grow, the number of disciplinary lenses looking at different aspects of or impacts of the gamic experience has grown, allowing for a variety of ways to not only place the digital game as an artefact within modern culture but also to consider its user, process and narrative in different ways. This diverse scope of study, inevitably, brings with it a variety of theoretical stances that inform a study into the digital game. This section will place the study of digital games within the context of multiple disciplinary contexts and specific areas of concern about the problems and opportunities from digital games; it will also look at specific fields of study, in particular, and, more specifically, geography, and then identify the ways in which the work of this can contribute to the study of digital games, particularly in the context of the online persistent game environment such as *World of Warcraft.*

Some of the earliest studies into the digital game and its intersection with broader society have been concerned with the health and psychological impacts of games on gamers—in a broader sense, on the positive and negative impacts of gaming on both the gamer and wider society. Many of these studies have looked at, in particular, the links between aggressive behaviour and violent games (for example, Griffiths, 1998; Anderson, 2004; Ferguson, 2010); addiction or pathological games use (King *et al*, 2009; Sim et al, 2012); the impact of digital games on childhood and adolescence (Olson, 2010; Fromme, 2011); and the gendered nature of games (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1994). Some studies, in response to these positions, have engaged in a debate around whether there can be a valid categorization of gaming as either addictive or aggression-inducing in nature (Wood, 2008; Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson and Dyck, 2012), seeming to suggest that while academic research (and a media that appears responsive to the negative effects of gaming) has been interested in discovering a link between games and their adverse impacts, successfully making a link (or disproving one) remains undetermined. In addition to research into the psychological impacts of gaming, the study into its health impacts has been more varied in scope, with some research focused on the potential negative impacts on health such as its causal impact on obesity or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

(Marshall *et al,* 2004; Burke *et al,* 2006; Chan and Rabonowitz, 2006) while others have identified the benefits of gaming as a pain management tool (Griffiths, 1997; Raudenbusch, 2003; Dahlquist *et al,* 2009); in cognitive development or improvement among children or older adults (Basak *et al,* 2008; Zelinski, 2009; Whitlock *et al,* 2012); and as a benefit for individuals with neuropsychiatric disorders such as autism (Griffiths *et al,* 2003; Tanaka *et al,* 2010).

Most educational research into gaming falls into the categories of games developed to specifically support education (often called 'serious games'), the development of games to use in the classroom (Prensky, 2001, 2005); on the ways that existing forms of gamic action can support educational agendas to teach a particular subject or skills (Griffiths, 2002; Lim, 2009) or as an educational tool, particularly for students with disabilities (Khandaker, 2009); and it has also researched any links between gaming (particularly excessive gaming) and poor academic performance (Jaruratanasirikul *et al,* 2009). As an example of how geography has engaged with games or virtual worlds in education, Kenneth Lim has researched how geography education can be supported through the use of in-game or in-world environments (such as *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*) in curricular development (Lim, 2009). In general, these aforementioned particular foci on gaming appear more interested in the causal or physiological impacts of gaming and less so in the production of games, the performative, narrative or interactive forms of gaming or on the action or practice of gaming itself. These studies were to develop later in the course of games studies, as the study expanded into other disciplines as well.

By the late 1990s and after, while studies into digital games continued to look at the links between the adverse and positive impacts of gaming (Hassan *et al,* 2003; Turner *et al,* 2012) and at the impact of gaming on education (Zagal and Bruckman, 2008), it had also expanded to look at the nature of the games themselves (Aarseth, 1997; Juul, 2005). There was interest in the perspectives of games design (Salen and Zimmermann, 2003; Sicart, 2008; Zagal, 2011) and the constructed and mapped space of the game environment (Schwartz, 2006;

McGregor, 2007; Lammes, 2008). Games were also looked at from what would come to be called the narrative (Murray, 1998; Ryan, 2001, 2008; Simons, 2007; Jørgensen, 2010) and the ludic (Aarseth, 1997, 2001; Juul, 2001) perspectives, and the relationship between the virtual of the 'gaming world and the real world' (Galloway, 2004: 1; *also* Wark, 1994, 2007). Games studies were also beginning to look at the players of games themselves, particularly when looking at issues of gender (Castell and Bryson, 1998; Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Fantone, 2003; Kerr, 2003; Taylor, 2008), identity and representation (Bartle, 1996; Bessiere *et al*, 2007; van Looy, 2009), and demographics (Griffiths *et al*, 2004; Williams *et al*, 2008)[5].

Contributions from fields including media studies, computer science, art, communication, cultural studies, sociology, literature or philosophy were all converging to pay attention to this 'new' medium with its complex arrangement and interplay of the gamic through varied engagements with the visual, aural, haptic and textual. Another way that interested scholars have reflected on the digital game is from the perspective of the interface (Galloway, 2006, 2009) and the structure (from the devices through to the in-game) of the game (Ash, 2009) and its related embodied actions (Bogost and Montfort's [2009] work around the study of the process of the game system itself, or platform [the 'backbone' of a game], is quite compelling in this area). Important contributions have also been made around the relationship between the haptic, affective and gaming devices, particularly when considering console-based games by James Ash (2009; 2011) and Mark Paterson (2006), both geographers, and Galloway's work (2006, 2009) around the interface and its function in the gamic experience. What the digital game was and how it could be studied and defined became a foremost interest, as these scholars began to place their work in what was being referred to as *(computer) games studies,* an interdisciplinary field devoted to the digital game and its layers of meaning in action (Aarseth, 2001) and above their own individual disciplines.

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[5] This will be covered in more depth in Chapter 2.

As this thesis is about the online persistent game environment, I wanted to pause to reflect on the ways in which games such as *WoW* and its predecessors the MUD or other MMOs such as *Ultima Online* or *EverQuest,* have been studied academically (although this will be considered in far greater depth in Chapter 2) and to identify the way in which my work aims to contribute to this body of study. As the MMO has grown into a popular type of digital games, allowing a large-scale, simultaneous gameplay with other players, researchers also began to study the experience of social interaction among gamers, with the emphasis often placed on the interactive aspects of gaming (Aarseth, 2004, 2008; Castranova, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Corliss, 2011). With persistent environments from which to engage in research and such a large player base to gain access to (Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg, 2008), perhaps it's not surprising that researchers were drawn to study the interactive gameplay experience in MMOs. In fact, if one is to believe games designer Raph Koster (2005), the notion of online game play and the connectedness it brings is where digital game play is heading to—thus its interactive nature is one of its discernible features. In other areas of specific study into WoW, focus has been, though in far more limited form, on a smattering of subject areas, including the following: spatial affect (Aarseth, 2008; Shaw and Warf, 2009); gender studies (Corneliussen, 2008); cooperation, collaboration and social interaction (Mortensen, 2006; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Bainbridge, 2010; Eklund and Johansson, 2010); the narrative (Krzywinska, 2006; Karlsen, 2008; Bainbridge, 2010); competition (Bainbridge, 2010); leadership and group structure (Prax, 2010; Kaplancali and Bostan, 2010); expertise and learning (Chen, 2010); a consideration of theorycrafting[6] in WoW gameplay (Paul, 2011); and the overlap of real and virtual (game) worlds (Taylor, 2006; Lehdonvirta, 2010).

If I could point to one particular drawback in the majority of these studies, it would be that they tend (with some exceptions) to lump together the experiences of play or players in the gamic environment of WoW as a single entity, meaning

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[6] Theorycrafting refers to activities by players to devise (through researching, algorithmic design and testing) the best way to improve their character's performance.

that its components overlap and interact in a coherent and widespread manner[7]. While there it's certainly true that there is a degree of coherence to the persistent game environment, it's also comprised of diverse elements that indicate a complexity within that coherence. My work has preferred to focus on the persistent game environment of WoW not as a kind of entirety, but instead specifically as a composite structure of different expressions and experiences of gameplay; and I have focused entirely on gamers who pursue the large-scale group activity: the raiders. What the multidisciplinary literatures around MMOs and WoW (in particular) have lacked to date (notwithstanding Chen's [2010] seminal study of a group of casual raiders), an in-depth and long-term study into raiding and its highly structured and competitive form of persistent group play. It is through studying these core elements that I will outline not only what sets raiding apart from other forms of gamic action in the MMO but also use the study to propose a way to enunciate the nature of gamic action in a persistent game environment as compared to other forms of digital gameplay.

When considering the multitude of disciplines that have studied the digital game (as sampled above), it is noteworthy that geography's contribution remains quite scant. In the aforementioned references, only a few (Lammes, 2008; Shaw and Warf, 2009; Ash, 2009, 2011) come from a geographically grounded perspective. These examples do not represent the entirety of geography's contribution, but there is not much more[8]. These modest contributions have been significant in informing aspects of digital game study (Ash's work around digital games is particularly helpful at informing the relationships between the spatial, haptic and gamic), however, leading one to speculate as to geography's potential to add

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[7] A good example of this is the way in which games researchers have focused on the socially interactive nature of an online persistent game environment like WoW or EverQuest. While this is a truism across the entirety of the persistent game environment, it does not allow for a focus on those nuanced ways in which specific gamers with specific gamic goals or orientations pursue and enact these socially interactive affordances and is not necessarily studied within this broader umbrella of the 'socially interactive'. Another good example would be demographic studies about MMOs (such as the work by Williams *et al,* 2008).

[8] I discuss this in more depth in Chapter 2, but examples of contributions from within geography have been made by Schwartz (2006); Power (2007); additional work by Ash (2010); Ash *et al,* 2009; Ash and Gallacher, 2011.

more. Ash and Gallacher (2011) identify the 'surprising' lack of 'attention' that digital games have received in cultural geography (351). In the 1990s and early 2000s, for example, cyberspace, the Internet, virtual reality (VR) and virtual worlds were extensively explored by geography (good examples are, Graham, 1998; Crang *et al*, 1999; Hillis, 1999; Dodge and Kitchin, 2001), but the online environment seemed to lose ground as an object of interest and the field did not look at the online persistent game environment until Shaw and Warf's contribution in 2009 about MMOs becoming 'increasingly sophisticated "worlds of affect"' (1335); and while studies into play and games have been pursued within the subfield of children's geographies, again scant attention has been paid to the digital game even within the scope of children's play. The downside of such sparse work into the digital game from within geography is its potentiality for lumping together the types and forms of games and gamic environments being studied, meaning that the temptation might be to presume that one type of spatial or affective experience within one type of digital game (such as the spatial navigation in a single-player computer-based real time strategy (RTS) game like *Age of Empires* as studied by Lammes [2008], or the haptic-oriented movement in a console-based game like *Lego Star Wars: The Original Trilogy* [Ash, 2009]) is like another. But there are distinctive differences within the spectrum of digital games, such as the specific affordances of online and large group-oriented gameplay that defines the raiding gameplay of an MMO that is less predominant in an RTS or console-based game. In order to fully map the nature of these diverse 'worlds of affect', geography will benefit from a deeper engagement with the digital game across different gamic expressions of play. This thesis aims to contribute to the study of digital games—and the persistent game environment in particular—by contributing a geographically and research participant informed study of the gamic actions and values of raiders in the persistent game environment.

Thesis scope and objectives

The focus of this thesis is to explore the experience of group-oriented gameplay called raiding in the persistent game environment of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). The work of this thesis is set entirely *within and around* this persistent game

environment. I use the terms 'within' and 'around' for very intentional reasons. *WoW* is the world's most popular MMO[9] and while it is a game, it is also a persisting game environment that consists of a community of gamers who have shaped and sustained many ways to play and engage with the game. Its reach bleeds beyond the confines of the gamespace and its narrative with a complex and modifiable user interface, forums, fan sites, gamer-produced software (to enhance gameplay), and voice over-IP[10] (VOIP) technological reliance. Even its distinctive nature as a game designed to 'never end' complicates and deepens the gamic action of its environment. This game becomes as the central hub of sorts in a complex mechanism that operates and maintains gameplay a dynamic, persistent online environment. I have focused this research specifically on practices of raiding in WoW because it is a mode of gameplay specifically oriented toward large-scale group play which provide an interesting way to explore the complex and sustainable nature of gamic action in the persistent game environment. This thesis aims to frame an understanding of scope of gamic practices in raiding that distinguishes it within the digital game. Furthermore, it seeks to discuss what distinguishes and sustains the production of raiding gameplay in the persistent game environment by following three recurring themes of enquiry—namely, action, competition and formation—all of which are explored in greater depth in later chapters:

1. How has the function of raiding gameplay evolved and developed within the MMO and, more specifically, the persistence of the space of play within WoW?

2. How does the notion of *formation* impact the ways in which groups engage in raiding, most particularly in relation to ideas of thresholds of belonging and a localised experience of group play?

3. How does *action* in raiding manifest and frame itself?

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[9] WoW has had the highest number of subscriptions (along with the majority of the subscription market) since approximately mid-2005. It currently (as of first quarter 2012) holds approximately 50% of the overall market share of subscriptions. This represents at least a 10% drop in overall market share since third quarter 2010, mostly due to the arrival of new MMOs into the market and a slight decrease in the total number of subscriptions. First quarter 2011 showed the highest number of overall active accounts and subscriptions to MMOs, peaking as just over 22 million accounts worldwide (http://www.mmodata.net/. [version 3.8 of the MMO data report] (Last accessed November 24, 2012.)

[10] An example of VOIP would be Skype, though raiders prefer to use TeamSpeak, Ventrilo or Mumble.

4. What role and expression of complexity does *competition* play within the enactment of raiding activity?

Through a consideration of the development and context of raiding along with these particular aspects—the action, competition, and formation of gameplay in raiding—along with a utilization of Galloway's moments of gamic action (2006) to help frame an approach to studying these aspects, I aim to paint a picture of raiding gameplay that contributes to literatures around not only these specific affordances and how they are expressed through gameplay but also develops an understanding of how their expression and association by raiders themselves provides an important perspective the impact of persistent game play on the digital game and games design. I argue in this thesis that a better understanding of online gaming as an activity is required and that this understanding is best gained through in-depth ethnographic research, which avoids some of the pitfalls of abstract, ungrounded definitions and allows gamers to be actively involved in the production of knowledge about gaming. Through such ethnographic research, further conclusions about the activity of play and its relevance for the performance of social relations can be drawn. Conclusions drawn from this work suggest that the study of game raiding (and its online-ness) offers an important perspective to understanding the nature of the complex online gamic environment; an environment that is at once controlled and malleable, multisensory and immersive, and complex yet localized, creating many simultaneous moments in gamic action where these representations of space, action, formation and competition function not so much to define gameplay but more so to shape and enable it.

An overview of raiding in *WoW*

This section touches briefly on what raids are and how they function within *WoW*. Chapter 3 explores the MMO and practice of raiding in more depth. As my research is set within the confines of *WoW*, my description of raiding here will be limited to what happens in that game. Different MMOs that offer 'raiding' as a feature of game play have slightly different mechanics as far as the size and scale of raiding goes.

Within *WoW,* there are different ways to engage in gameplay, one of which is to pursue the large group play function called 'raiding'. Raiding is considered an activity a player pursues as part of the end-game content, meaning that players need to be at the top level of the game to access raiding gameplay. Because WoW has experienced a number of 'expansions' since its initial release in 2004, while all raiding content has been designed as end-game content (and for the maximum player level in the game), this has meant that raiding content has been released alongside these various expansion stages of the game. Oftentimes, a player primarily interested in raiding will focus on reaching the game's level cap (currently level 90) in order to get to the 'end game' content. This end game content is considered the most challenging game content with the highest reward output. It allows a player to improve their characters so that they can continue to progress through the end game content as it is released by the game designers. It is often said by many raiders that the game doesn't begin until level 90.

Raids are designed for groups of 10 or 25 and there are two difficulty levels for each raid: normal and heroic (more difficult than 'normal'). This is a more recent development in game design to allow more casual gamers access to some of the end game content (as the 'normal' raiding content is viewed as more accessible [and easier to some] for casual players) while still allowing raiders to concentrate on and compete to complete the difficult raid instances. Raid instances are areas (imagine a castle in the sky or an underwater cavern), geographically separated from the rest of the game, that players can enter (typically in these groups of 10 or 25 players) to try and defeat the enemies held within. Raiding instances often include an overriding narrative or lore-driven aspect, but they are primarily areas of controlled space where raiders have to navigate a number of challenges, often increasing in complexity and difficulty the further into the area that the group travels.

Each raid instance will have anywhere from 1 to 15 'bosses'. A boss is the term used within gaming to describe a very difficult fighting encounter with usually

one or more enemies that are designed to be stronger (and oftentimes physically bigger) than the players that face him or her. And each boss fight involves different strategies and complexity. Some require fast response times and others require careful team work and cooperation. Some fights require a specific mix of player classes and abilities. Fights will always require different types of game characters with varying skill: the tank, the damage dealer and the healer. *Healers* are able to cast healing spells to protect themselves and their companions, *tanks* are well armoured characters that can take a lot of direct damage from an enemy while the *damage dealers* attack it from either up close with melee weapons or from far away with ranged weapons or spells.

Forming and sustaining these groups can be a challenge. Players have the option to group up with random players to do a raid, but this is considered risky due to the fact that players have varying skill levels and abilities and this is not known when players group up randomly. Players avoid this riskier choice by joining raiding guilds. These are social groupings of players interested in raiding together in an ongoing manner. Raiding guilds are formed with longevity in mind, with some groups still together since the game's launch in 2004. Raiding guilds typically schedule raids, have specific roles and responsibilities, and even provide a system of rewards (a bit like being paid) for regular participation. These players will often spend 3 to 4 hours together 2–5 days a week, depending on how much time they decide to put into raiding. The most dedicated raiding guilds will expect a certain level of consistent attendance and skill from its members. Failure to meet the guild's standards and expectations will often result in losing the privilege to raid with the group.

Raids are designed to be difficult. While elements of a fight with each boss are generally the same (for example, a particular boss hurls lightning bolts at random people in the group every 25 seconds and brings out a little army of minions to attack everyone in the raid at some point during the fight) but how the group manages the complexity of the fight with its particular group members is where the challenge lies. It can take days or weeks of elapsed time and many failed

attempts to successfully figure out how to kill a boss for the first time. Oftentimes raiders are expected to come prepared for a fight by reading up on raiding strategies or watching videos (produced by other guilds that have already completed the challenge). They will often be expected to optimise their play by modifying their user interface or using added software to enhance their performance while raiding.

Raiding is not merely experienced by each raiding group (of which there are tens of thousands) alone, however. Raiders engage in forms of competition by tracking and displaying raiding achievements. There are Web sites that rank guilds globally by how fast they complete the latest raid challenge. These sites are player-created and often referred to as important indicators of rank and achievement by guilds. Many will rely on their own game server's rankings to give them an accurate picture of their own progress, but will also carefully follow the progress of the world's top guilds. For many players, raiding has become their primary interest while playing in an MMO and Blizzard (WoW's publisher) has ensured that raiding content is integral to its ongoing and future design[ii].

Chapter overview

This thesis is organized into several major thematic areas, all of which are outlined below. While all chapters intersect to construct a landscape of the specificities within raiding gameplay, each are considered on their own in order to draw out their particularities.

Chapter 2, 'Exploring play and games in an online world', looks at the intersection of theoretical influences that have helped to inform the research conducted in this thesis, particularly a way to think through the forms of gamic action that can exist in a complicated environment of the MMO. I will consider the gaps in research (both the artefact and within geography) in relation to raiding in the

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[ii] http://www.mmo-champion.com/content/2687-Mists-of-Pandaria-Press-Tour. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

MMO and the digital game. While prior research into the digital game has been conducted across a variety of fields of study it remains understudied in geography. In addition, while the MMO has been studied academically, to date raiding gameplay has received scant attention. These disparities will be discussed. I should note that as later chapters delve into the specific practices of raiding, a consideration of previous research and literature around those themes will be drawn out within those chapters as well.

Chapter 3, 'Placing raiding within the context of digital games', places the emergence of raiding gameplay within the contextual framework of digital games. In this chapter I suggest a parallel, yet related, development of the digital game along the lines of the console-based and the computer-based games, both types of digital games having their related yet distinctive elements. In the case of the development of the MMO and online games, I also draw on the influence of the narrative into the development and design of MMOs. Finally, I explore the specific way in which the Internet and its inherent connectivity has enabled group play and raiding in MMOs. By considering the placement of raiding within the MMO, one can begin to draw out the specifics that shape the practice of raiding (and as explored in the subsequent chapters).

Chapter 4, 'Researching online game worlds', outlines the methodological framework that I designed and utilized to research raiding in the online game environment, one that was shaped to accommodate the particular needs and challenges of online research. I approached conducting research online from the perspective of 'being connected' to both the site of my research and also to the raiding groups that I worked with throughout (and beyond) my fieldwork period. My approach, in the end, comprised a complex and varied series of methodological choices that enabled me to draw out the necessary empirical data to aid in my exploration of raiding but also provided a means to reflect on and analyse that data in an effective way.

Chapter 5, 'The "ins and outs" of formation in raiding', explores group formation in raiding activity. Group play is integral to the mechanics of raiding and is an apt expression of the online game environment with its inclination toward the associative in play. The ways in which groups form, or arrange themselves, to pursue sustainable raiding activity represents a specific expression of play by raiders. The chapter explores the nature of formation among raiding groups (called guilds), where guilds often engage in framing their value set by establishing thresholds of belonging aimed at group presentation and perpetuation in the persistent game environment.

Chapter 6, 'Exploring action in the raiding game space', explores the ways in which raiders engage in gamic action. It considers how the shaping of action in raiding enables a specific type of engagement in gameplay, particularly within space of the persistent game environment. It also draws on the intersecting spaces of play in the online persistent game environment, namely the spatial relationship between the desk, gamespace and those intersecting spaces between.

Chapter 7, "Considering the layers of competition in raiding", the final empirical chapter, analyses competition within the scope of raiding. Competition is a primary expression of the way that raiders want to play and occurs in a number of ways through the game's design and through player-driven ways. While competition is pervasive in raiding, this remains an understudied area. Its significance frames raiding in the persistent game environment. This chapter considers the layers of competition as expressed by raiders and raiding groups and how that, in turn, informs the experience of play within the persistent game environment.

And finally, in the concluding thoughts, I summarize the work of this thesis and propose a framework from which to understand the nature of raiding in the persistent game environment, a series of overlapping and interwoven practices that are shaped by raiders to not only engage in the forms and expressions of

complex gamic action but also intended to sustain long-term gameplay in large groups. The conclusion also considers the contributions both to geography and digital games from this preliminary in-depth study and what future opportunities exist for further research into raiding and gaming practices in the persistent game environment.

In addition to the aforementioned parts of this work, I have produced a DVD to accompany the thesis. It includes all pertinent, referenced video footage and audio recordings integrated into the discussion of this thesis. These audio-visual pieces are included to allow an engagement with the multiple forms and ways that the action of raiding is expressed and experienced in the persistent game environment. It is my hope that these excerpted pieces (as specified in the List of Videos and Recording on pages ix–x) will help orient the reader to the experience of raiding more than my own descriptive handling might achieve on its own.

Terminology used in this thesis

And finally, a word about terminology used in this thesis. In this work, the following terms will be used: a *casual gamer* describes those gamers who play MMOs in a more casual capacity; the term *raider* will be used to describe those gamers who are primarily interested in raiding while playing *WoW*. *Player* or *gamer* will be used as more generic terms to refer to individuals engaged in game play in digital games in general. *Character* (or *game character)* is the term I use to refer to the avatar that a player creates and controls in game play. While these terms are often used in different ways among gamers themselves, for the sake of this thesis, I shall retain this distinction, as warranted.

In terms of games played in a digital format, I have opted to steer away from terms that I feel are not specific enough in their meaning such as 'videogames' or 'computer games' in preference for the term *digital game* to refer to all games that

are played using current digital technologies such as game consoles, tablets, handheld consoles, smartphones, computers, and so on. In terms of those games played on smartphones, tablets, arcade machines, handheld consoles or full sized consoles (these types of games are often called videogames), I have opted to use the term *console-based games.* For games played on computers, playable either offline or online (or both), I have opted to use the term *computer-based games.*

I used the term *persistent game environment* for all aspects related to *WoW* including the game itself, its players, the game publisher's Web site and forums, player-created forums and sites, and software, and other player-driven events and activities that are directly linked to the game world (including conventions, social gatherings, and so on). In addition, I have used the acronym *MMO* to describe all types of online computer-based massively multiplayer roleplaying games. I use the term *game space* as an encapsulating term I use to refer to all game play action that takes place within a digital game.

The term *gamic* is used in this thesis to refer to that which relates to, is from or comprises gaming or games. I should point out that while the primary and historical use of the term, or word, 'gamic' refers to 'having a sexual character; sexual' (*see* OED Online, 2012), there has been a more recent appearance of the term *gamic* in academic (and mainstream) literature in relation to games. Galloway's *Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006) is representative of that practice and I have opted to follow his example.

Raiders often refer to the large-scale player groups as *10-man and 25-man raids.* While it is an admittedly outdated practice to apply a gendered naming convention to these groups, particularly in light of the fact that groups have both male and female raiders in them, I have opted to carry forward this naming convention to remain consistent with the practices of the community itself.

I use the term *raiding tier* to refer to the level of difficulty of specific raiding areas in the game. The earliest raiding tier (tier 1) was released in 2004 and was accessible to players at

the then level cap of 60. Each subsequent game expansion (70, 80, 85 and most recently 90) has had additional tiers of raiding with the latest tier (or level) being tier 14 which was released in September 2012 with the latest game expansion, *Mists of Pandaria*.

Chapter 2:

Exploring play and games in an online world

Introduction

The digital game is widespread across multiple platforms and technologies. This has resulted in a complex scope of the digital game and raises the question of how one approaches its academic study, particularly when considering the specificities of raiding in a persistent game environment. This chapter answers this question by placing this thesis' research and its participant driven findings within the context of the theoretical sensibilities that have informed the work. It also reviews the pre-existing multidisciplinary literature around play and games and considers a number of theoretical lenses that inform this research, specifically Galloway's moments of gamic action (2006) and Bogost's procedural rhetoric in games (2007). It places research into the raiding community of WoW within the scope of studies into the digital game and what research and methodological considerations need to be taken into account to support the particularities of researching an environment that is playful, technologically arranged and persistent. The content presented in this chapter helps to frame and guide the later empirical work produced in this thesis, particularly in relation to how the following specificities amongst raiders exist: formation, action and competition.

This chapter draws on a number of thematic areas to help build the theoretical and contextual framework of this thesis. First it will consider existing academic research on play and games, intending to draw out those salient ideas that contribute toward the story of this thesis. Secondly the chapter explores the more recent academic work on digital games and their particular ways of engaging in the process, procedure and framework of play, and progresses toward the more specific work on digital games set in online persistent game environments like *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Third, the review of key literatures has led me to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of raiding culture that forms the main focus of subsequent chapters.

The study of play and games

While an association with experiences of play and games could be considered pervasive and even metacommunicative—and the dual concepts of play and games seem interwoven into an unmistakable associational relationship (called 'a bounded utility' by games theorist Alexander Galloway [2006: 19])—its formal academic study has had a somewhat shakier existence. Not only have play and games been approached from different disciplines with varying approaches, play and games have often been viewed in contradictory ways, making even a theory about play difficult to enunciate, according at least to noted play researcher, Brian Sutton-Smith, who commented that 'when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness' (1986: 1). He also notes that problems in conceptualising play come 'in part because there are multiple kinds of play and multiple kinds of players' (Sutton-Smith, 1986: 6). Even games theorist Jesper Juul, in his own work about video games, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds,* outlines seven distinct (though not uncomplimentary) definitions of a game, all suggested by different academics (2005: 31) before suggesting a definition of his own[12]. Why has this richness and diversity in play caused it to be so challenging to conceptualise?

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[12] Specifically these seven game-related definitions highlighted by Juul (2005: 30) have been contributed by Johan Huizinga (1938: 13), where he notes that play is a 'free activity

Different answers to the how, what, why, and when of play, however, have resulted in a kind of *ambiguity* about what play is and what it is not, why it exists, and what its purpose is (Sutton-Smith, 1986). It is unclear if this problem in definition comes from a perception of play and games as being frivolous and inconsequential; the input of so many disciplines into the study; or simply because of their pervasiveness in human culture. Academically oriented perspectives on play and games are housed across multiple disciplines and from different yet very specific lenses of the lived experience, with the most predominant areas of focus being in early childhood development, animal behaviour or leisure pursuits. This compartmentalises the experience of games and play to not only a specific form of lived experience but also to specific perspectives within disciplines. In geography, for example, this compartmentalising is well represented by play being most often explored through children's geographies (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; JL Thomson and Philo, 2004; S Thomson, 2005), without as much interest in defining or framing play or games beyond the context of a child's lived experience.[13] In recent years

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standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life'; by Roger Caillois (1958: 10-11), who calls games an 'activity which is essentially: free…, separate [in time and space], uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe"; from Bernard Suits (1978: 34) who defines playing a game as engaging 'in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs'; Elliott Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith (1971: 7) define a game as 'an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrial outcome'; Chris Crawford (1982), outlines four common factors in games as 'representation… interaction,… conflict, and safety'; by David Kelley (1988: 50) who defines a game as 'a form of recreation constituted by a set of rules that specify an object to be attained and the permissible means of attaining it"; and finally, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003: 96), in their work around digital game design define a game as 'a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome'. All of these definitions highlight different themes within a perception of games, though Juul points to certain commonalities that can be considered from these definitions when framing the nature of games (2005). Juul's own definition is 'a game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable' (2005: 36).

[13] I should point out that certain researchers in geography have noted that play is of concern to 'all ages' (Harker, 2005: 48); for the most part, however, geography's focus on

further geographical consideration of play and games from a digital game perspective has been given to a number of specific areas, most particularly: the relationship between the video game and geographies of militarism (Power, 2007); the use of mapping and cartography in digital games (Lammes, 2008); the idea of representation in the digital game environment (Schwartz, 2006; Shaw and Warf, 2009); to the affective landscapes of console-based games (Paterson, 2006; Ash, 2009, 2010a) and computer-based games and play (Shaw and Warf, 2009). Ash and Gallacher (2011) also consider the video game and its placement within cultural geographies. But aside from these preliminary contributions, the digital game remains relatively understudied in geography, though there has been interest in geographical aspects of gaming in other disciplines and spatial concepts permeate analyses of play and gaming (see Huizinga below). Even less explored in geography is the online persistent game environment of an MMO such as *WoW*[14], something I will explore later in this chapter and in more depth in Chapter 6 (where I look most specifically at the relationships between space, movement and action in raiding). But perhaps this restraint in exploring the nuances of play and games relates to the inherent problem and ambiguity that emerges when considering the meaning of play and games.

For the most part, when academic study has endeavoured to contextualise play and games in broader terms, it has been through its meaning in and utilization within *culture.* It has also been considered in terms of a kind of process of ordering or categorization of rules and structure, particularly when attempting to define or contextualize it. I begin this section by focusing on two important early contributions to studies into play and games—*Homo Ludens* by Johan Huizinga and *Man, Play and Games* by Roger Caillois—both of whom are often cited and discussed by games researchers and theorists, particularly as a starting point for looking at playing digital games within the context of a modern, socially-scientific

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the nature of play has been primarily in relation to children, thus possibly limiting its scope of attention toward considering games and play in other contexts.

[14] Shaw and Warf's (2009) work into WoW and persistent online environments and Schwartz's (2006) consideration of cultural representation in the MMO environment are two of only a few contributions from geography specific on WoW and the persistent online game environment.

oriented study of the twinned concepts of play and games.[15]   My study begins with their work because they have often been a starting point from which recent scholars have proposed studying the nature of play and games. One example is games theorist Alexander Galloway (2006), who acknowledges these scholars' contributions from a historical perspective but also as a foundation from which one can frame certain salient, novel forms of action within digital games as compared to the perception of the type and nature of games and play that were in existence when Huizinga and Caillois completed their work on the topic. In his 1938 work, sociologist and cultural historian Huizinga explains that 'play is older than culture'(19). He goes on to define play and games as:

> ...a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being not 'serious', at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.... It promotes the promotion of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (24)

For Huizinga, play is not part of the ordinary and it is non-serious (though he later states that some play can actually be very serious [1938]) and absorbing and intense. His definition identifies some seeming contradictions in the reality of play. His exploration of play—he does not really discuss games or their categorisation—is focused on the 'otherness' of play, the fact that it is removed, secreted or isolated from the ordinary or mundane, while still an event that promotes 'social groupings' and the development of civilisation (18). In fact, while on the one hand describing the almost unreal elements of play (no material interest, no profit, outside of ordinary life), he then stresses that 'all play means

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[15] I find this particularly compelling when considering the work of Huizinga (written originally in Dutch), who claimed in the foreword to his work that the title was meant to be about the play-element 'of' culture, not 'in' culture, as the English translation noted, *A Study of the Play-Element In Culture*. He wrote: "...it was not my object to define the place of play among all other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play." So it seems that even Huizinga himself, in his own foreword, had never endeavoured to 'define' play, despite the proclivity of later theorists and academics to often trace the 'modern study of play' back to him and to refer to his work as a 'standard reference in game design' (Rodriguez, 2006: 1). I have retained my discussion of Huizinga's work and reference in this chapter because, despite Huizinga's stated intent, his work has been widely regarded and referenced in relation to play and games.

something' (19) and proceeds to devote his time to considering play against the broader elements of culture: play and language, play and war, and so on.

While Huizinga's work primarily focused on play's impact on culture, he is also quick to point out its inherent uniqueness:

> The more we try to mark off the form we call 'play' from other forms apparently related to it, the more the absolute independence of the play-concept stands out.... Play lies outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity, it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here. (25)

This seeming contradiction in Huizinga's description of play suggests an early idealization of play that has continued to impact its perception (Sutton-Smith, 1996). It also hints at the complexity that later scholars have found in describing the meaning and function of play. An important contribution that Huizinga has made to the ways in which later researchers would attempt to conceptualize and enunciate the nature of play and games, particularly from the more recent advances in digital games, is his introduction of the term 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1938: 10), more specifically (underline added for emphasis):

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground.... The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

This idea of an 'isolated' and 'hedged round' space wherein play takes place and all activity is 'an act apart' suggests that Huizinga believed there was a separation and otherness to play and games and that all else beyond this circle, this 'arena' did not apply to play or games (and that play and games did not exist beyond these 'temporary worlds' into the 'ordinary world'). This term *magic circle,* above all others, have caught on amongst modern games designers and theorists, and they adopt it as a descriptive for that 'special place in time and space created by a game' and as the place where 'the game takes place' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 95), though Juul (2005: 33) specifies that this circle encapsulating a 'separate space and separate time' has some 'obvious objections and counterexamples' (33) which Zimmerman extends by describing the *magic circle* as a helpful 'visual device'

(2010: 238) to consider games from but that there is far more blurring between the 'mundane' world and the world of a game than such a metaphor allows. Juul also notes that these earlier ways of looking at the magic circle may represent 'a somewhat rushed application of traditional theoretical concerns onto games' (2008: 56). I am inclined to concur with Juul's and Zimmerman's perspectives, particularly when it comes to problematizing the mapping of the actuality of a persistent game environment and those gamic experiences that exist in, through, and around it. The *magic circle* in this environment may be more encompassing than the metaphor intends.

Huizinga's contribution has been viewed in different ways, being described as the 'most influential of all modern play theorists' (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne, 1984) while also being criticised for his nostalgic view of culture and civilization, with *Homo Ludens* considered a work of its time rather than a comprehensive exploration (unable to stand up to 'inspection' as Steiner writes [1970: 14] in his introduction to the book) of the concept of play (Geyl, 1963). More recent studies even suggest that Huizinga's definitions and discussions of play factor in recent development of games genres that overtly engage with ideas of seriousness such as 'serious games' that draw together education and games (Rodriguez, 2006) even though these types of games and platforms on which they were developed post-date his work by decades and Huizinga's own assertion that play is not 'serious'.

Criticism of his work also highlights his failure to discuss key elements of play such as games categorisation, children's play or the science of play (Caillois, 1958; Steiner, 1970). Although perhaps that is understandable considering Huizinga's own claim to have a far more narrow understanding of play in relation to culture, and not this broader 'general' approach that later theorists have attributed to him. Nonetheless, Huizinga makes some important points: namely that the 'play-concept' has an important role to play in culture and that its function in the development of civilization cannot be overlooked (Caillois, 1958). Further, his

definition of play continues to influence what Sutton-Smith later described as the many 'rhetorics of play' (Sutton-Smith, 1986: 9).

For the scope of this thesis, I acknowledge the contribution that Huizinga's work has made to the body of literature on play and games in its acknowledgement of the role of play and games in human experience; in some ways, positioning it as a starting point in the study of play has provided a means by which later research can frame its study. While the medium and approach toward the ludic may have changed with the influence of technological advancement, elements of Huizinga's exploration into the notion of play help build a foundation for how we have come to view and validate the concept, particularly his attempt to place a framework for perceiving and understanding the significance of the 'play-concept' within society.

Another significant and oft-referred to contribution to early academic work on play and games came from French philosopher Roger Caillois. Caillois lauds Huizinga's contribution to play study from the perspective of sociology and culture, but notes that his lack of study into games in relation to play limits the work. Perhaps this is due to Caillois' own focus on the meaning of play through games or perhaps because games are best considered in relation to play (Caillois, 1958). Caillois' framing has a 'materialist' (Galloway, 2006: 20) orientation toward the study of the 'play-concept' by looking at games and their varied expressions. Caillois' categorises games as: agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation), and ilinx (vertigo). Viewing games as the 'residues of culture' (1958: 58), Caillois often links games to earlier important cultural or social functions (i.e. playing with masks), thus seeming to differentiate games from what earlier scholars had viewed them as: something trivial and inconsequential (1958). This may point to his idealisation of play by highlighting their anthropological and historical place in human development. Caillois' definition of play is strongly connected to games and evokes Huizinga's earlier definition: games are free (play is not obligatory), separate (set within limits of space and time), uncertain (the course of which is undetermined), unproductive (creates neither goods nor

wealth), governed by rules, and make believe (an awareness of a second reality) (Caillois, 1958).

Caillois makes a point of noting that while he views these qualities as being 'formal' elements of play he also acknowledges that the definition itself may need further subdivision and that the qualities of games cannot be prejudged (1958: 11). Caillois' definition suggests a problem that Caillois himself notes: games change so the definition may have to change. Caillois' contribution to the understanding of play and games is significant in his attempt to consider a broad range of what games can be and what their origins say about the nature of play. While this intertwining of play and games is certainly easy to relate to based on how often the concepts are paired together, I would posit here that based on current forms of play and games, concepts of a 'game' or 'play' can fall outside of earlier considerations of these concepts. Certain environments, often called 'games' by virtue perhaps of the limitations of language more than anything else, may not be played, at least not in the manner in which a scholar in 1958 may have intended or envisioned[16]. So while Huizinga's and Caillois' perspectives on play and games add an important perspective as to their nature as cultural artefacts and expressions of culture, there are some limitations to their definitions. In his own consideration of Huizinga and Caillois' work, Galloway (2006) acknowledges a limitation in their particular work on games and play: as an orientation toward the 'experience during play' (21) only and their disregard of what he terms as elements such as 'non-play' (21), suggesting that their concepts of play can only be situated 'inside algorithmic game machines' and do not suffice as a way to perceive the 'medium in its entirety' (21).

The later work of Brian Sutton-Smith adds further depth to the work into play and games. His approach is not so much to frame or limit the scope of play but to draw on the multidisciplinary study of the topic. He presents what he describes

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[16] Good examples of this are games like *Beautiful Katamari* or *Shenmue,* games defined more by atmosphere than goals.

as the 'seven rhetorics of play' which cover a variety of theories and discourses about play. He lists these seven rhetorics as:

- *Play as progress:* children's play to adapt and develop
- *Play as fate:* applied to gambling and games of chance
- *Play as power:* applied to sports, athletics, and contests
- *Play as identity:* traditional and community celebrations and festivals
- *Play as imaginary:* playful improvisation of all kinds in literature and elsewhere
- *The self:* applied to solitary activities like hobbies or high-risk phenomena
- *Play as frivolous:* applied to the activities of the idle or the foolish (Sutton-Smith, 1986: 9-11)

These rhetorics, he notes, have framed the study of games and play and all contain some element of play. He has also focused quite extensively on the issue of the 'idealization of play' (1986: 9), something he attributes to the global nature of play (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne, 1984; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and due to recent work in the field that has focused on 'child's play being its work', on sports building character, and on academic work that has stressed that play is voluntary, positive, flexible, and social. While he does not negate these approaches, Sutton-Smith suggests that play and games can also include 'obligatoriness, negative affect, rigidity and dysfunctionality' (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne in Smith, 1984: 6). Another issue raised by Sutton-Smith is why play for adults is often viewed as a 'mere diversion' while it is considered a 'meaningful' activity for children (6). The answer may reside in the Western-driven perspective that play functions as part of the developmental process for children and less so as a necessary practice among adults. It could also be due to how some fields view play's significance in child development, as described by Peter Smith's observation that play is viewed as an example of useful adult activity, a preparatory activity rather than an ongoing one (1984).

Sutton-Smith is reluctant to define play but does delineate its core elements: it must be broad and universal; not limited by Western concepts; it is characterised by distinct performances and stylisations; it can be brief or enduring, diverse or articulate, conceptual or tangible; play is a language, a form of communicating (1986). This definition—or at least this conceptual framework for a definition—is

indeed broad in its intent, but this could point to Sutton-Smith's overriding belief in the role that play *plays* in human existence:

> All creatures live in a world of strong emotions and are dominated by those feelings. We constantly seek to manage the variable contingencies of our lives for success over failure, for life over death. Play itself may be a model of just this everyday existentialism. (1986: 228)

Relating play to 'everyday existentialism' is compelling in its simplicity; perhaps too much so, however. Certainly 'play' appears everywhere, in our language, development, interpersonal interaction. It may indicate that play is not a fringe element of being human but in fact a core element. Perhaps the human propensity for play is fundamental to being human. But perhaps this inclination is due to the trend, earlier in the research, to regard the specifics of these twin concepts (Galloway, 2006) of play and games as both linked yet individual concepts without considering their broader construct within the medium of modern games.

Finally, Sutton-Smith attributes the complexity of defining play to its variability. He posits that play is a 'facsimilization of the struggle for survival as this is broadly rendered by Darwin' (1986: 231). If, in fact, play represents the fundamental human drive to survive and all games 'act out' that struggle, then play is more than just a trivial distraction or leisure pursuit. Play is not necessarily a tidy experience that always has a beginning, middle and end—there is dysfunction and obligation, there is the 'work' of play, there is the failure in play. And in the online persistent gaming environment—with its large numbers of players, potential for large-scale group play and ongoing (potentially endless) gameplay—the consequences and expectations of play may have far greater meaning and scope than in other games, especially as one aims to 'sift through the various traces and artifacts' that it contains in and around it (Galloway, 2006: 21). What makes Sutton-Smith's work so compelling also makes it challenging: in his attempt to cover the fullest scope of play, he seems reluctant to make a commitment to what he feels play really is. And as this notion of identifying and defining play and games remains unclear and one that appears so variable in nature and scope as to defy specificity, perhaps the best approach, amidst all of

this *ambiguity* in defining play and games, is to engage not in their definition but in exploring the action of play and games and thereby perhaps enunciate a series of values and experiences that might help shape its context and impact. This is the approach I have opted to take in this thesis—not so much to attempt to frame or define play or games, but more to focus on its action. It is the way that players engage with the game—through the *action of play*—that I find most compelling, particularly when considering the persistent, never-ending nature of the MMO. In my own research, I intend to help frame what play and games mean within the context of the MMO by focusing on the experience of play and on the ways that players themselves (in the form of raiders) identify their orientation toward the game.

The widespread convergence of digital technologies suggests that the very way we play games and the mediums by which we pursue them may be changing, simply by virtue of these forms of gamic experiences that transcend more conventional notions of games and play. This proclivity is well represented through digital games with persistent gaming environments like an MMO. The MMO may be unique among games in that it can be seen as representing what Nigel Thrift has termed 'interlocking spaces of interactivity' and 'new spaces of play' (Thrift, 2003: 390) and its persistence and evolving nature may incorporate many or all of Sutton-Smith's 'rhetorics of play'. In the following section I promote the necessity of engagement (through action and process) in play and games as a methodological research approach and how this idea of an active engagement with the medium has both permeated much academic work around games research and informed my own approach to research.

Play and the digital game

As digital games, in the form of computer-based and console-based games, have become a more prevalent form and expression of play and games in recent years, the academically oriented description and definitions of play and games becomes more focused on the process of play, its interactivity and the narrative experiences of play (Ip, 2011a; 2011b). In particular, there has arisen a tension between two

primary ways to study games, that of the narrative and active. I will explore these in more depths in this section.

The action or process of play (often referred to as ludic) has interested digital games researchers who seek a better understanding of the interplay between human and technological elements (Giddings, 2009), namely through such components as the interface, or process, by which the player accesses and navigates the game. As Espen Aarseth explains,

> Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative reader or listener. The creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in the uses of games (Aarseth, 2001: 1).

The very action—or method—of gamic play forces even the researcher to engage with the object of his or her research from the level of the game's participants, or players, themselves. This action-based orientation is widely accepted, dare I suggest *expected*, among games researchers and theorists and is something I share, as can be seen in Chapter 6, where I discuss the experience of raiding through space, movement and action. Orientation toward the active in gaming has in some cases helped frame a theoretical sensibility toward games research. Galloway (2006) describes 'gaming' as an 'action-based medium' and notes that digital games can 'render social realities into playable form' (17). Games and play placed in modern, computer game-based terms moves from being an isolated, 'othered' activity (as Huizinga described it) to being an active, participatory activity; they even seem able to make social interaction 'playable'. Aarseth's notion of games being 'object and process' suggests a dynamic relationship between the static objects of the game and the fluid elements that transcend a game into a process. This 'creative involvement' with a game itself becomes a kind of orientation toward action. If one subscribes to the idea of games as an 'action-based medium', then the study of games should not be regarded as a passive or observational activity. Ludologists suggest that hands-on gaming is a crucial component of actually studying games (Simons, 2007).

In addition to looking at the process of play and games, digital games researchers have also looked at the narrative perspective or 'the representation of an event or

a series of events' (Abbott, 2002: 13) within the context of play and games. Viewed as a kind of malleable approach to storytelling in digital games (Ip, 2011a, 2011b), narratology in games has been considered from a discourse analysis perspective (Bridgeman, 2007) and as a design technique (Juul, 2005). Marie-Laurie Ryan (2001) delineates narrative as a concept beyond the idea of fiction, a framing concept that suggests a digital textuality (hence narrative) inherent in the medium. Games researchers interested in the narrative, or literary, aspects of digital games situate it as 'part of the tradition of narrative literature' (Kücklich, 2003: 1) and not just a part of games studies. If anything, this attempt to identify the narrative and its affiliation with literature (and other narrative-bound disciplines), speaks to the complex, multi-faceted nature of digital games. For Jason Mittell, the narrative in games presents an opportunity for studying the 'intersection between storytelling and gameplay' (2012: 11) and that digital games are (along with other forms of media, such as television) 'a mode of ludic storytelling where playfulness is an important facet of narrative comprehension' (11). In Jørgensen's (2010) analysis of digital game characters, she proposed that characters are used as 'narrative tools' (315) and that they feature as 'consciously chosen' (316) elements of game design.

These two different approaches to games research have been viewed as a tension between game's action (process) and its narrative (story). The earliest years of research into digital games study have seemed to express this tension or contrast the two approaches between the ludological approach (interested in processes of gameplay) and narratology (interested in the narrative in games) (Juul, 2005). This tendency to explore issues relating to the narrative of digital games (Ryan, 2001; Kücklich, 2003; Jørgensen, 2010) or the process and action of games (Aarseth, 1997, 2001; Juul, 2001; Galloway, 2006; Simons, 2007; Bogost, 2008) preoccupied a significant part of the earliest stages of digital games research. In fact, the conflict or tension between what video games were and how best to study them, articulate their role and impact, and even what discipline should study them caused a 'jumble of disagreements and discussions' (Juul, 2005: 11) in the earliest days of digital games research. This kind of ambiguity about the very place and function of modern games research has been been typified as more of a

'gold rush' (Juul, 2005: 11) where the earliest attempts to define this field of academic study were more like a race to capture the first idea or definition. As Juul (2005: 11) explains, 'The most important conflicts here are games versus players, rules versus fiction, games versus stories, games versus the broader culture, and game ontology versus games aesthetics.'

Aarseth (2007), however, and later researchers have endeavoured to resolve this apparent tension by suggesting that games possess both the narrative and process elements that work in concert to create the digital games experience, and that the narrative (or 'fictional') does not weigh as heavily (or exclusively) into the genre of games as it might in other media that rely more intensively on the fictional (such as a novel).

> While … many games do contain fictional elements that support the game's purpose, it is also clear that these elements are not as important and dominant as fictional elements in, well, fiction, and that they enter into complex relationships with the other ontological elements of games, both the virtual and the real. (Aarseth, 2007: 22)

Ip (2011a) also suggests that certain elements of the areas of games research, such as the narrative and interactive, can be studied in concert leading to, as he notes, a better understanding of the balance between control and conflict, thus stimulating the impact of the storyline.

In fact, Rodriguez (2006) explores those tensions through certain newer genres of digital games, such as 'serious games', and these earlier conceptions of the function and role of play. Also questioned (and asserted) is whether these digital games represent a new medium (Galloway, 2006; Gunzel *et al,* 2008) or a form of art (Smuts, 2005; Tavinor, 2011). The idea of games as stories or fiction transforms or further develops these earlier notions of what play and games are. What has largely been missing so far, however, and this may be attributable to my earlier suggestion that geography has remained—with the exception of a significant few—relatively unengaged in the study of digital games, are those elements between, around and beyond the ideas of the narrative and process, such as the embodied player-driven experience of gaming (Ash and Gallacher, 2011) and the

'affective assemblages' (Power, 2007: 285) (reminiscent of Shaw and Warf's [2009: 1339] 'worlds of affect') that can be found in digital games.

Perhaps this perceived tension between studying games from these varied perspectives is attributable to the various disciplines and interests that are interested in studying games. As Aarseth notes, 'We all enter this field from *somewhere else*, from anthropology, sociology, narratology, semiotics, film studies, etc, and the political and ideological baggage we bring from our old field inevitably determines and motivates our approaches' (2001: 1). This variation in approach has led some of the more contemporary games scholars—especially those studying videogames or computer games—to promote the move toward establishing game studies as its own academic field, sometimes referred to as ludology, (Wolf and Perron, 2003). This tension between the ways and hows of games research has, however, according to Jonathan Corliss' analysis of the social science study of digital games, resulted in 'inhibiting … the development of an adequate theoretical approach to the study of video games—as a unique technocultural phenomenon' (2011: 4). While some suggest that games studies may warrant its own disciplinary field, Ash and Gallacher (from geography) suggest that perhaps the nuanced perspectives of different fields could make important contributions to the study and understanding of games, thus validating its consideration from within different disciplines rather than being centralized into one focal area of study (2011). And for Grant Tavinor (2008), studies into the digital game appear stunted by the lack of theory:

> An analytic approach to the theory of videogames is well overdue, particularly one that is cognizant of how such definitional debates have taken place in other cultural domains. The field badly needs a definitional debate to be carried out in clear, unambiguous terms so that the range of theoretical options open to games scholars is made clear. (1)

This tension seemed to be focused on where priority in research and meaning should lie: in the process by which a game unfolds or in the series of events and storylines that comprise the narrative of the game. From a strictly research-driven and discovery-led ethos, my position has been reliant on the processes of player engagement within the gameplay experience. My work has been situated in that place where the player not only engages with the processes of play (the

ludological sensibility) and the underlying storylines and world building that sustains the persistent game environment (the narrative elements) but also the way in which the forms of engagement exact an impact on gamic action. In the following section I will highlight this diversity of perspectives into studying the MMO and WoW.

World of Warcraft **within games studies**

An MMO is an online game that allows multiple players access to the same virtual game world simultaneously. I term MMOs a *persistent online game environment* because aside from periodic maintenance work done on game servers by the game's publisher, the game is designed to be continuously accessible and running. This persistence allows for a perpetuation and exploration of the social and active experience of play in a manner that could be seen as different from other types of digital games. The persistent nature of the MMO is not as highlighted in previous research as in other aspects of MMOs, however. To date, the social experience of the persistent game environment has shaped the majority of research on MMOs. In fact, in Corliss' overview (2011) of the social science-related studies of video games, he notes that a particularly compelling aspect of digital games is the nature of their interactivity, something he refers to as 'distinct forms of interactivity' which has represented a 'valuable area of investigation' in games studies (8). He becomes even more specific when he highlights the observation by social scientists about the social interactivity (Corliss, 2011) in the MMO environment.

This interest in social interaction and how it functions in MMOs is explored and expressed in different ways; Corliss (2011) observes that researchers often see the forms of interaction as unique to the digital game genre. Others have described it as 'social spaces' (Eklund and Johansson, 2010: 3) and as a 'complex' environment that 'transcends the game category to become a virtual world' (Bainbridge, 2010: 4). Indeed, this notion of complexity in an MMO like *WoW,* particularly through the lens of social interaction and world-making, is a recurring notion amongst scholars and is depicted in different ways when describing *WoW*.   For Ducheneaut *et al* (2006: 308), the complexity is linked to the gaming multiplicity

within the game, 'two games in one' as they put it. This idea of two games can be represented in WoW as the *first game* being played from the lower levels until you 'level up' to the game cap of level 90, and *second game* being played once you reach level 90 and want to refine or improve your character by completing 'end-game' activities. This concept of many games is supported by Bainbridge, who states "WoW is a virtual world that includes thousands of games, rather than simply being a game itself" (Bainbridge, 2010: 6); and he also notes that the complexity of WoW relates to the evolution of the game beyond a game to become virtual world, a world that he says offers 'so much scope for action' (Bainbridge, 2010: 4).

This intriguing notion of the multiplicity of games in general is reinforced by Paul (2011: 2) who notes that games can be 'played in many different ways'. And Dyer-Witheford (1999, 2002) and Yee (2006) have touched on the work-play dynamic in games, suggesting a complex environment of action, participation and engagement that goes beyond the strict confines of the game world itself. Perhaps this idea of the multiple within the single (many approaches to play within a single game environment) is why the current scope of research has been oriented toward certain areas (namely sociality or interactivity which spans all of these forms of play) while paying less attention to others (like raiding, which is an elective and less widespread form of play); some areas are pervasive across the entirety of the MMO environment (such as the interactive experience of gameplay) while others are more narrow in scope, action or process (such as raiding).

Ondrejka (2006: 112) suggests that the MMO is unprecedented as it intermingles 'the social while encouraging exploration and discovery'. For Kryzwinska and Lockwood (2006: 279) the complexity represents an overlap and expansion of these preceding concepts: 'It is a game, a virtual world, and an online community.' The descriptions above suggests that games like *WoW* are seen as more than simply conventional games; as a result, perhaps it allows for a reconsideration of notions of play in light of these games. They take the more traditional notions of

games as a finite, limited interactions with a pre-determined set of goals and outcomes and expand them to an action-oriented 'community' that is persistent and progressive.   These variations and depths in complexity may be representative of the ways in which more current academic work in gaming has been conducted.

While *World of Warcraft* has been given attention by scholars since its launch in 2004, the attention has been surprisingly limited when comparing it to the significant commercial success[17] of this MMO and its model representation of modern technological advances (Coleman and Dyer-Witheford, 2007). When it surpassed other popular MMOs in its subscription base soon after its launch in late 2004, academics did devote some attention to *WoW* (Ducheneaut *et al,* 2006; Williams *et al,* 2006). Earlier studies were mostly focused on reporting the demographics and game play choices of *WoW* players using passive collecting techniques like game 'add-ons'[18] that tracked demographics, population densities, character creation and player movements (Williams *et al,* 2006) or on comparing WoW with other pre-existing MMOs such as *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* that dominated the first generation of MMOs (Ducheneaut *et al,* 2006). While there may not be a great depth to the research on WoW, its variety in scope has grown in recent years as I highlighted in the Introduction. Raiding gameplay as a component of WoW has been touched on by a number of researchers, but usually more from an observational and limited perspective that is primarily interested in the distinctive aspect of raiding game play when comparing it to the broader scope of MMO gameplay (such as Taylor's 2008 consideration of WoW).

In one of the few examples of specific research into raiding gameplay, Mark Chen's (2010) in-depth ethnographic study about a group of WoW players who formed (and eventually disbanded) a guild (the in-game term for officially

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[17] Since its launch in 2004, WoW has dominated the market share of global subscriptions for MMOs, holding at least 50% of the market share. (MMOdata.net, 2012) Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[18] These are computer programs that are typically called 'add-ons' as they are software that is added to the game interface and interact with the game software to perform a function or modify the game interface).

organised social groups) and participated in game raiding during the early years of the game's release explores expertise and learning in raiding. In his work, he considers the life cycle of a raiding guild and how it navigated both success and, eventually, its formative failure. This consideration, from the perspective of group learning, adds an important perspective to the experience of large-group raiding and has helped inform my own consideration of researching game practices in an MMO. With the exception of Chen, works on raiding gameplay engage with it on a superficial level. They also tend to rely more on describing the nature or scope of raiding (and large group play) taking place in WoW rather than an in-depth analysis or study of the embodied action of raiding itself. This suggests the mechanisms used thus far for the study and analysis of this type of digital game are still mostly observational in nature, something other scholars have touched on when considering the fact that little research has been conducted into the ways that games are played (Reeves *et al,* 2009; Ash and Gallacher, 2011). Ash and Gallacher (2011) even go so far as to note that the 'practices and experiences of' gamers are 'often overlooked' in preference for a focus on the images (the visual or narrative) within games and the identities of gamers 'within community of gamers' (354). Considering the complex ongoing nature of an online persistent game environment and the fact that it is, in fact, constructed of many communities of many players, this predilection for studies into identity and social interaction seems understandable—but it has limited the potential for understanding the nuanced ways that raiders play.

As a discipline geography is just beginning to contribute to the study of digital games. For example, Shaw and Warf's 2009 discussion of how online persistent game environments (using WoW as an example) create 'worlds of affect' (1335) and Shwartz's consideration of games like WoW being representations of 'culturally constructed spaces' (2006: 321) are a few ways that geography has considered WoW (and the persistent game environment). Though geographer James Ash (2009, 2010a, 2010b; *et al,* 2009) has mainly focused on console-based gaming practices, he and Leslie Gallacher, in their discussion on cultural geography and the digital game (2011) have suggested that a study of games such as WoW can be placed within the 'broader trajectories of the "virtual" geographies

of cyberspace' and describe the potential of studying an MMO for positive building of 'communities and unique cultures' and negative risks for 'cyberbullying and serious addiction' (357). While the purpose of their paper was not to focus on the MMO as having these attributes alone, it is clear that Ash and Gallacher see the virtuality and community building potential of the MMO as distinctive[19]. Along with these ideas and the notions of spatiality and overspill between game worlds and the 'real' world, contributions from geography are calling for attention to be paid to both the 'affective excess' (Shaw and Warf, 2009: 1335) that can exist in persistent game environments and to 'the ways in which users interact with the rules of videogames and the technological apparatuses of individual videogaming systems' (Ash and Gallacher, 2011: 361). Building on and critiquing some of the limitations of earlier work on 'cybergeographies', these new interventions in the debate point to new and compelling insights that can be gained from geography continuing to add to the research.

Despite the notion of space being indelibly linked to the field of geography, this is not the discipline from which the most significant contributions have been made to the study of space in the persistent game environment. With the exception of Shaw and Warf's (2009) work on affect and spatiality in the MMO, Lammes' (2008) work on mapping and cartography in real time strategy computer-based games and Ash's (2009, 2010) work on the haptic and spatial practices in console-based game play, geography has primarily attended to spatial aspects of gameplay in the subdiscipline of children's geographies (as discussed earlier). Elsewhere the closest affinity that geography might have had to considering space in the persistent game environment would be the earlier work around cyberspace, the

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[19] While the MMO is a widely recognizable representation (and innovator) of multiplayer gaming and collaboration, particularly on the 'massive' scale, I should point out that this form of gaming practice is not unique to the online persistent game world. Console-based games are often played by small groups either on the same console (with games on the Wii or through Kinect offering options for at least eight players on the same console) or over the console's networks (like joining via the system link on the Xbox and playing games for up to 16 players at once). These are more limited in scope, however, typically being one-off games and do not offer the same mechanics within games for community building through guild formation that often occurs in MMOs.

Internet and virtual worlds (Crang *et al,* 1999), such as Adams (1998) where he delves into the notion of the virtual place, Flanagan (2000) where she considers the relationship between gender and spatiality in virtual worlds or even Thrift's 'intelligent environment' (2003: 390) where he indicates these emerging 'interlocking spaces of interactivity', a striking observation that suggests the kind of experience with space that I enunciate in Chapter 6 (where I identify three interrelated spatial relationships in the persistent game environment).

But even though there are ways in which geography's consideration of the online environment can be related to the digital game, for the most part the spatial aspects of digital gaming are analysed from other disciplinary perspectives, including architecture (McGregor, 2007) or ludology (Aarseth, 2001; Aarseth, 2008). For some space is predominant to the game environment (Aarseth, 2001, 2008; Adams, 2003; Flynn, 2003; McGregor, 2007). Others acknowledge that the world of the game is significant (Taylor, 2006) being not only a part of the gameplay experience but also significant in game design itself (Walz, 2009). Even the notion of spatiality in the game has been problematized by researchers into different naming descriptors and categories (not unlike my own attempt to delineate these spatial relationships in Chapter 6), using terms such as 'gamespace', 'spaces of play', 'playspace' or 'ludic space' to enunciate the nature of space within gameplay. Space becomes a concept that is appealing to try and delineate but that may remain, as geography has long known, more complex than a simple descriptor can alone address.

A noteworthy example of this is Aarseth's consideration of spatiality in WoW. For Aarseth, space in WoW is 'hollow' (2008: 98): at once a comparative experience (where he literally compares the time it takes to move across the far-flung 'continents' of Azeroth to walking across the small island south of Copenhagen where he lives) and on the other a contributing factor to a game's success. It provides, he asserts, a provocative idea of space within the game and suggests ways in which games scholars have problematized space in games. For the purposes of this thesis, I consider space from its active state, as an expression

of a raider's engagement with the persistent game environment and approach to identify these relationships within the raiding space. From that perspective I will delineate the way that space functions not merely as an aspect of the game itself but as a means by which a raider can shape (and pre-shape) the space in support of gamic action.

As far as the specialised communities of WoW (such as raiders or roleplaying groups) are concerned, much less work[20] has been so far devoted to their gaming practices. The primary concern in relation to a game the size and scale of WoW is its expansiveness (Aarseth, 2004). Specific segments of the WoW gaming community, such as raiders, have had less attention paid by researchers than the consideration of WoW as a whole. Perhaps this reflects Corliss' assertion that the game has been regarded as a kind of social 'Petri dish' (2011: 6) and as such concentrated on the broader aspects of community life: social expectations, widespread approaches to gameplay, interaction and representation, and so on. But does this material reflect the specific community of game raiders that this thesis explores and documents? Yes and no. My research has found that while social and community life factor significantly into the experience of game raiders, there is more complexity and specificity in this community than a broad sweep can reveal. Even the case of studies of game practices and gameplay can be limiting due to their broad stroke: certain studies and research methods such as those explored in Nicolas Ducheneaut *et al's* (2006) analysis of gameplay in WoW provide an important overview of the general experience of gameplay and gameplay practices of a large sample of players on a particular WoW server, but there is not enough specificity to indicate the practices of gameplay or the approaches of specific groups such as WoW raiders. There has also been a surprising lack of consideration of the question of how (or if) the nature of the gamic is impacted by the fact that these are *persistent* game environments. Like other subcommunities in WoW, raiders do not exist completely in isolation— their experiences, interests, and priorities are both impacted by and impact on the wider game community. Mapping and documenting this requires a fluid

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[20] Exceptions to this would be work on groups by Corneliussen (2010), the exploration of player development and levelling in WoW by Bainbridge (2010), and the more in-depth ethnographic work by Chen (2010).

approach to understanding the roles and actions that denote this specific community while being mindful of the role it plays in the broader community. The following section draws out those theoretical lenses and perspectives that have helped to frame and inform the methodological and analytical approach of this thesis as it explores the specific actions and affordances that both define and distinguish raiding in the persistent gaming environment. I will reflect on the work of Ian Bogost and his proposal of procedural rhetoric (2007) as a way to study the process in games; Alexander Galloway's four moments of gamic action (2006) to consider the ways in which action is framed within digital games; and notions from within geography of the pre-shaping (Ash, 2010b) and materiality (Ash and Gallacher, 2011; Galloway, 2006) of the digital game as I work through those conceptual tools that help frame a study of the complexity in the persistent game environment of WoW.

'Play's own diversity': Theoretical approaches to studying games

> ... the very disciplinary diversity [of play researchers] might itself suggest some way of grappling with the problem of play's own diversity.
> —Brian Sutton-Smith, in *The Future of Play Theory,* 1995: 275

> ... it is not only in attempts to define videogaming that the experiences of practices of videogaming recede into the background of academic accounts.
> —James Ash and Leslie Gallacher, 2011: 354

In the current study of digital games—from varying disciplinary perspectives including the fledgling field of game studies itself—a diversity of theoretical or conceptual frameworks have been utilized to consider play and games, including the organic development of new theories from within the field. I would suggest that this seems in line with a kind of 'interstitial approach' (Ford, 2009: 415) to theoretical adoption and utilization, a consideration that is suggestive of both an attempt and reluctance on the part of this new field of study to align itself with any particular theory and an admission of the complexity of the pervasive nature of games and play. Perhaps, as Sutton-Smith notes (in the quote above), this merging and adoption of many theories from many disciplines is inevitable

considering 'play's own diversity'; I would also say that it goes back to the inherent dual nature of games, as Aarseth notes, 'games are both object and process' (Aarseth, 2001: 1); working through this complexity may also contribute to this diversity in approaches and perspectives. Approaching the study into the experience of play in a persistent game environment such as WoW validates this idea of 'diversity', both from the methodological and theoretical point of view.

Within games studies a few notable theories (or perhaps I should say a merging of theoretical ideas) have proposed ways to consider digital games and I have found them informative in shaping my own research approach, particularly as a way to work through framing the nature of raiding gameplay—and as these theoretical approaches have emerged through an attention to the digital game, I find them particularly useful in approaching the complexity of the raiding environment of an MMO. Most notable amongst those theoretical framings are procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), algorithmic gamic action (Galloway, 2006), and the so-called complete theory of video games (Juul, 2007). While all of these ideas and theories build on various pre-existing ideas, and their proponents all make that clear, what distinguishes them is the fact that all of these were generated by academics predominantly interested in using them as constructs (or ways of thinking) to research games.

Ian Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric is described as, "a practice of using processes persuasively ... for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments" (2007: 3). Procedural rhetoric is interested in the ways in which the rhetoric is expressed and the manners by which the procedural (or rules) of a game function. It attempts to orient the consideration of the many factors that go into a game, placing emphasis on the processes and mechanics of play and the game itself. It is compelling in that it permits an in-depth exploration of the process and construct of games themselves, but its orientation is primarily oriented toward the process of the game itself (Harper, 2011), which may not permit, on its own, as robust an

exploration of the complex social and performative environment that distinguishes the persistent game environment of an MMO. What is helpful about drawing on procedural rhetoric while studying raiding in WoW? One can use it to consider those mechanisms of gamic design that have influenced the nature of play within the persistent game environment and to help develop a framework from which to navigate that human/nonhuman dynamic (as manifested as the machine or operator, as described by Galloway [2006]) which is so present in games.

Jesper Juul describes a complete theory of video games, (2007) a kind of theoretical sensibility identified, he notes, primarily through the design principles put forward by the games design industry itself. This theory, he suggests, promotes the tenets of digital games design themselves, seeming to suggest that the game itself is a goal-oriented challenge that should be fun and, if done correctly, can place the player into what is referred to as the psychological state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This theory orients the experience of games toward their outcomes ('goals'), and suggests that goal orientation is a predominant agenda for games design and gaming pursuits by players. This is an important way to think through games as it captures the significance of the goal of games, which can be a significant motivating factor for not only gamer interest but also for game loyalty, which is an important feature of a persistent game environment such as WoW and its subscriber base model. While this is often the case in many games, Juul notes that some games lack goals and some players will engage in 'removing or weakening the goals of games' to afford 'a wider range of player experiences' (2007: 2). Goals and goal-oriented game play is undoubtedly an important way to think through both the design and motivations of players, of which Juul references competitive multiplayer games (2007) as an example, and a way to think through the reasons for engaging in competitive play, as a goal-oriented activity. This is explored more in Chapter 7 by considering the idea of the nature of winning taking on a new shape in a gamic environment where the game is not designed with an end in sight.

A more recent approach has been the theoretical application of phenomenology to games analysis (Mallon and Webb, 2006; Reeves *et al,* 2009; Crick, 2011), which allows for a more in depth consideration of the embodied experience of play, particularly in relation to the object-oriented experience. In the case of Reeves *et al,* their study, a consideration of skilled expertise in gaming, is representative of how a methodological framework can provide for specificity in analysis, in this case as it relates to the embodied experience of play (2009). This approach helps inform a way of understanding not only the embodied experience of play, but also the ways in which raiders engage with those goals of play. While I have not oriented my own work specifically toward a phenomenological point of view, I concur that gamic action is an embodied experience and thus considering it from this perspective can lend an important perspective to its study.

This idea of embodiment and gaming is well explored though ideas of the haptic, the embodied presence or the teleplastic experience of play. These are compelling concepts that many researchers have considered in recent years, particularly when regarding the notions of spatiality in relation to digital games. James Ash's work on the nature of teleplastic technologies (2010) and our deepening relationship between the human and technology provides an important way to consider the experiential elements of play. The work on experiences of touch and presence in haptic devices (Paterson, 2006) suggest the intimate and transformative connection between the human and technological. Both of these ideas suggest a way to consider the complexity in the MMO raiding experience. The multisensory, multitechnological experience, which both Ash and Paterson note in their work, of digital gameplay is integral to MMO gameplay and raiding in particular. Where these ideas are limited in relation to the persistent game environment and raiding, however, is in relation to the nature of the dynamics between device and user. In his work on console gaming, Ash (2010) rightfully suggests a pre-shaping impact of the game and console on the user. This becomes less straightforward when considering the persistent game environment, raiding and the computer, however. Due to the complex nature of the gamespace and the ways in which raiders engage in modification (something I explore in more depth in Chapter 6) it becomes less clear whether the device and its design pre-shapes

the players' gamic experience or whether the player pre-shapes the device to enable the gamic experience. In the case of the former, this idea is more commonly represented in most types of console-based games and even some computer-based games, as Ash (and others such as Paterson [2006]) has explored (2010). In the case of the latter, however, this seems a more appropriate way to think about the online persistent game environment, particularly where raiders are concerned.

Their primary device, the computer, is a malleable (or to coin Aarseth's term, 'flexible') object that raiders (as my discussion in Chapter 6 will illustrate) can modify, shape, and re-define. This shifts the paradigm from this idea of teleplastic technologies' (Ash, 2009) control of the user through 'systems that pre-shape users' access to space in a dynamic way' (415) to the user being able to *pre-shape their system's* access to space in a dynamic way. This is not to say that the systems of raiding gameplay (desk, computer, Internet, software) have no controlling or pre-shaping influence over the user's gamic experience, but I would suggest that a user's ability for control is far more prominent among the gaming practices of raiders. Hence my use of the term 'malleable' seems apt as the technology and its related components are shaped to facilitate the execution of raiding game play. If anything, this subtle distinction reinforces the differences within forms of digital games and that certain concepts may not be universally applicable within the medium.

Taken together, these approaches all suggest ways to understand and articulate the nature and scope of digital games. As I am suggesting throughout this section, there may be more 'at play' when considering how to theorise, problematize or conceptualise play and games in the digital environment. While these different types of research and theoretical considerations for game play are significant and help paint a picture of what a particular game and its related player community may be like, a persistent game environment such as WoW requires a theoretical framework that permits—without prescriptiveness—a method of capturing its complexity without prescribing its outcome. Persistent game environments like

World of Warcraft are complex environments designed to allow players to not only navigate the designed game space but also utilise additional forms of action and interaction to facilitate a successful gaming experience. These environments can be described as at-times teleplastic (Ash, 2010b), or the intersection of the human with technology, and at-times virtual, or removed from the physical world, drawing on and reliant on a complex series of events and performativities: technologies, interfaces (Galloway, 2009), users, formations, actions and interactions to enable the activity of the gaming environment. In contrast with the functionality of a console-based video game, the online persistent game environment of the MMO allows for and frees up the player's control and actions to allow for, perhaps, a kind of specificity in exploration and expansion in play, much as Juul notes when he points to the ability of gamers to work against even the designed goals of a game (Juul, 2009). In the case of raiding, the complexity of actions both by the user and by technology, create a landscape of interaction and action that both create and perpetuate the community.

In his analysis of digital games, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* Galloway (2006) suggests the notion of an 'algorithmic culture' which helps to define and frame a consideration of what he terms gamic action. It is *action,* Galloway argues, that most definitively frames digital games. While he acknowledges the role of the narrative or design elements of games, he prefers to remain along the boundaries of exploring the medium of gaming itself and its distinctive, active nature. His interest in the 'doing' (3) of gaming propels his interest in framing the overall active nature of gameplay and the various factors that shape it. And in fact, his approach to considering games is representative of this position: it is not so much a theory as a 'few conceptual movements', carefully stitched together to promote the 'formal medium' of digital games (xi) Galloway seems most specifically interested in a promotive agenda whereby he can utilize his algorithmic approach to navigate the 'exploration' of this formal medium of gaming, a concept that is carried forward and promoted by others that had hoped to shape an early agenda into games as their own medium, much as one might consider film or television their own media (Wolf, 2001; Gunzel *et al,* 2009). Much like Bogost's procedural rhetoric, the algorithmic approach provides an

innovative means by which to think through these new processes of digital games and their inherent complexity. If anything, Galloway's own weaving together of thoughts, ideas and frameworks to support this idea of gamic action signals that very 'diversity' in play that Sutton-Smith (1995: 275) had noted when it comes to exploring and considering play.

Galloway explores 'a broad theory of gamic action' (2008: 8) from the perspective of four 'moments' (6) or 'a four-part system for understanding action in videogames' (37). The first moment, what he refers to as *'diegetic machine acts'* (12), encompasses the 'ambience act' within a game that most gamers are probably familiar with (even if they had not named it before); that moment when 'the machine is up and running—no more, no less' (12). This gamic action is characterised by the machine's operation for and of itself, its own narrative (diegesis). Mostly distinguishable by those pre-designed features and elements that the game itself acts out, this can be well exhibited by that moment in WoW when a player's avatar is standing idly by on the screen while the player is doing nothing with the interface, keyboard, or elsewhere around the game (I consider this in Chapter 6). Perhaps, on the game screen, the avatar shifts her stance every 10–15 seconds or a bird chirps in the distance; maybe the trees in the background are rustled when a wind picks up. None of this is intentionally acted upon by the player, or even controllable by the player herself. I would suggest, as a gamer myself, that those moments of action that encompass that ambience act are those that are atmospheric in nature and barely evident to me while I am engaged in active game play, or even when I'm momentarily distracted away from the gamescreen or the computer. They are the white noise of the game, those events and activities that seemed designed to provide a better sense of immersion or 'presence' in the game while seeming unnoticeable. In some games, as Galloway explains, the ambience act is a form of activity within itself, with the game continuing to progress along its natural route. A game's (machine) own diegetic act can even happen within the persistent game environment in multiple ways; one such example is where a game character left standing can be attacked by a hostile monster if they are standing too close—the character may not even seem aware of this attack while the hostile creature continues its assault until the

player returns to either respond to the attack or deal with the consequence of the game character's death.

The second gamic moment is what Galloway refers to as *nondiegetic operator acts*, those 'gamic actions in which the act of configuration itself *is the very site of gameplay.'* (13) These 'actions of configuration' (12) pertain to those aspects of gamic action where the player (the operator) is engaged in acts that take place outside gameplay (or narrative of the game) itself; as Galloway describes it, 'action' becomes 'a type of inductive, diachronic patterning of movements' (12). The player sets up the game, arranges their game space environment and constructs a pattern of play, all of these actions comprise this moment of gamic action—the place where the actions are 'always executed by the operator and received by the machine' (12). In the case of a persistent game environment, Galloway mentions the 'add-ons in *World of Warcraft'* (13) as an example of a nondiegetic operator act; a form of planned action (a type of software program designed to modify or enable certain forms of gameplay [this is explored in more depth in Chapters 6 and 7]) utilized (and often even designed) by players to control or support gameplay. These forms of configuration are specific to those forms of action (or play) that take place beyond Huizinga's 'magic circle' to form a kind of relationship between the plan of play and the action of play itself. These are exemplary moments where the 'operator' (raider) is pre-shaping her gamespace.

The third moment of gamic action is termed *diegetic operator acts* which Galloway likens most closely to the way in which play in games is conceptualised by the earlier games theorists such as Huizinga and Caillois, it 'illuminates action in the way that action is most conventionally defined, as the deliberate movements of an individual' (21). This is where the player (operator) is engaged in acting within the gamespace (and its narrative); and where the action takes place 'inside the imaginary world of gameplay' (22). This is the place of Huizinga's magic circle, where gameplay and its relationship to the world of the game take

place. Galloway adds that diegetic operator acts are also characterized by their *move acts* and *expressive acts*. Within the game a series of movements and actions often define the gamer, be it through a controllable series of actions made by the player or actions that the player must fulfil in order to meet the narrative aspects of the world of gameplay. If one regards diegetic operator acts as the most commonly associated idea of what gameplay is like, then examples are easy to find: in the case of the persistent game environment, there are quests, dungeon runs, levelling up activity, interacting with other players, travelling around the game space or even participating in raiding gameplay.

The fourth, and final, moment of gamic action are *nondiegetic machine acts,* which Galloway defines as those 'actions performed by the machine but not contained within a narrow conception of the world of gameplay' (28). Galloway suggests that these actions exhibit themselves as internal forces ('like power-ups, goals, high-score stats') or external forces ('software crashes, ... temporary freezes, server downtime, and network lag') where the machine can impact the gameplay action in ways that have little apparent connection to the game. Within the nondiegetic machine act, certain acts are regarded as disabling, 'any type of gamic aggression or gamic deficiency that arrives from outside the world of the game and infringes negatively on the game in some way' (31), and enabling acts are seen as 'the absolute essence of smooth runtime in gameplay. With an enabling act, the game machine grants something to the operator: a piece of information, an increase of speed, ... cash, or some other bonus.' (31) For Galloway, the notion of 'game over' is the most 'emblematic' form of non-diegetic machine act. Game over, in the terms of a console-based game, may be the very end of a particular round of gaming or when the gamer has failed in gameplay; in terms of a persistent game environment (where death is rarely final), 'game over' is more akin to when a player cancels their account and deletes their character[21]. In terms of how a gamer might intuitively experience the *nondiegetic machine act*, they

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[21] Even that is rarely permanent in the case of persistent online game environments, when many MMO publishers allow players to reactivate cancelled accounts.

might refer to this form of action as RNG, lag, bugs[22] (as types of disabling acts) or level-ups, experience gained, or other achievements (for enabling acts).

Adopting these four moments of gamic action is an informative framework from which to explore the most meaningful aspects of raiding in WoW—even to explore its qualitative values of formation and competition; it provides enough diversity in the means of categorizing action in gaming to support a study in the complexity that can exist in a multiplayer environment. Galloway notes that in the case of looking at the multiplayer environment, 'the very concept of diegetic space becomes quite complicated with added players' (36). Applying Galloway's approach to gamic action has provided a useful framework from which to map this form of complication within the persistent game environment, but there are some limitations. Galloway himself indicates this when he points to the 'complicated' nature of a multiplayer environment, for example, where studying the game through gamic actions alone may provide a more limited understanding. Ash also points to the limits of Galloway's approach to studying games from their actions alone (2010) as it disregards the spatiality of the game. If one were to regard the relationship between action and specific gamer goals, however, particularly with regard to how the players in this game interact with these goals allows for a way to expand on this framework and to consider the reasons for specific gamic action in raiding gameplay (in particular). I suppose this last goal is where I have, admittedly, taken Galloway's concept of the game as an action-based medium a bit further than perhaps he intended. In his own work around gamic action he stressed that his goal is not to equate it with 'interactivity' (2006: 3). But in my own approach, primarily influenced by the dynamic nature of pre-shaping of the game space that can take place in raiding, I will attend to the interactive (or overlapping and intersecting) elements of the environment. I have

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[22] RNG (random number generation) is considered gamer slang for 'random bad luck', a way of trying to describe failures in performance, the system, or gamespace that are perceived as being beyond the control of the player; lag refers to delays and performance issues typically caused by poor internet connections or slowdowns in communication between the player's computer and the game's server and bugs refer to system flaws or mishaps in the game design or process, typically impacting the abilities of players to navigate the gamespace or complete game activities.

opted to regard Galloway's framework as a flexible and informative one as it does not necessarily say anything specific or overt about gamic environments such as WoW (nor does Galloway claim that it should) but its flexibility is what makes it appealing for studying an environment I find to be quite malleable and complex in scope. Above all within these theoretical approaches are important and helpful perspectives from which to consider the digital game but in order to address the complex (or as Galloway describes it, 'complicated') nature of the online persistent game with its interactive, online orientation and specific forms and expressions of gamic action among raiders needs to draw on multiple perspectives to engage in its study and consider different methods of how to engage with this consideration of gamic action.

Conclusion

This thesis represents a series of early steps toward developing a theoretical framework for researching the experience of raiding gameplay in the persistent game environment. It draws from the theoretical contributions made by games scholars, Galloway (2006) in particular, as a means of studying the complexity of the forms of gamic action. Much of this work on the way that raiders play is new and many of the research approaches have had to work through the problems and opportunities of how to research raiding and MMOs, particularly when considering the complexity of form, action and competition that it manifests, and when considering the nature of conducting qualitative research in the online setting. It has had to consider a number of theoretical ideas around studying the digital game in order to help configure the best way to approach the particularities of raiding gameplay and how to shape the research methods and aims themselves.

Mark Chen observes, in his study of group work and play in WoW that the practice of raiding is a demonstration of the successful adoption and deployment of human and nonhuman resources (2010). And what is the nature of this environment that relies on these various technological and non-technological resources? And how does it factor in to how one studies the 'complicated'

(Galloway, 2006: 36) nature of gamic action in raiding, the distinctive large group activity of WoW? Raiding allows for an attendance to and reliance on a multitude of players, gamic actions, game spaces and play-specific values. It expands and contracts, speeds up and slows down, experiences failure and success, retention and loss. This specificity within these complex relationships and enactments drive the raider to frame and shape her approach to play and, subsequently, the raiding community. How this is studied and encapsulated should follow a parallel route by the means of *tracing* these experiences for the purposes of mapping the specific elements of gameplay raiding; by 'concentrating on' the 'flow and connectivity' (Hine, 2000: 64) that is prevalent to the online environment and by attending to the relationships and connections 'between different spaces' in the persistent game environment that 'extend the connection between game and everyday life' (Fields and Kafai, 2010: 89).

This notion of tracing raiders through their formation and gamic action and through the engagement with certain values is the goal of this thesis. The specificities of certain raider-identified core values in the community—namely competition, formation and action—are mapped across the web of raiding and will be delineated in specific detail throughout the empirical material of this work. Due to the complexity that exists in a persistent game environment, and in the raiding community in particular, and its specific connections with the interplay (or *interaction*) between the virtual and the real, the group and the individual, the technological and the human, this study does not follow a single theoretical framework or approach—its 'complicated' nature requires a consideration of those key moments of gamic action that help delineate the ways that raiders navigate and engage with both the game space and the affordances that spill over and into the space beyond. It has to look at the nature of gamic action not only from its literality as an action within the game space but also as a value in a persistent game space. If anything, my review of the 'diversity' (Sutton-Smith, 1995: 275) of theories about play reinforces the importance of studying these communities through the eyes of the members of that community themselves. A deeper engagement with these environments of play requires a player-oriented approach to let the player contribute their own understanding of

the community that they inhabit. Using a conceptual framework that permits the voices of the research subjects to take centre stage provides the necessary depth to mapping the specificities in gameplay among raiders. Thus I draw on the perspectives of Galloway's gamic action to help trace through these experiences and utilize specific online ethnographic methods to build an informative framework for considering the various ways in which both the persistent game environment and raider both interact and intersect.

To recap, this chapter had a threefold aim: first, to consider the literature and pre-existing work surrounding play and games, paying particular attention to the work on digital games and WoW in particular; second, to examine the ways in which digital games have been considered within and through geography; and finally to consider what theoretical perspectives can be drawn on to inform an understanding of the specifics of game raiding. This chapter outlined the conceptual background that has influenced the story of this thesis, a story that is shaped by a desire to best capture the perspectives of the protagonists of this story themselves, the raiders. This was done to enunciate the nature of structured group play in a persistent online game environment, a never-ending gamic experience that inhabits the dynamic space where the human and digital overlap and interact, enabling a fluid, malleable relationship and creating new opportunities to map gamic action.

The aims of this thesis are not so much to pigeon-hole the raiding community into the role of a certain type of culture or social group as much as to answer the question of what specific features that may (or may not) distinguish it from other parts of the gaming community, particularly in relation to its nature as part of a persistent game—a game that never ends. Corliss (2011) has asserted that the MMO game environment has been well studied by social scientists. This is true if you are only interested in the nature of social interaction across the MMO space. The active and embodied experience of raiding has not been well studied. Scant attention (barring the work referenced earlier in this chapter) has been paid to what amounts to one of the most 'complicated' (Galloway, 2006: 36) communities

in the persistent game environment. By tracing the gamic actions and values of play and analysis, what raiders themselves have to say about the nature of their community and approach to play fills an important gap in mapping the scope of gaming in the digital game and in putting forward a complete picture of these specialised forms of gamic action in the raiding game space.

 The following chapter contextualizes the development of the digital game and in particular the emergence of the MMO. This is done with the goal of placing the MMO within the context not only of the digital game but also to provide a close study of both the MMO and raiding group play.

Chapter 3:

Placing raiding within the context of digital games

Introduction

As earlier explored in Chapter 2, play and games have been widely regarded as a prevalent activity (Sutton-Smith, 1996), an example of everyday practice. The ways that games are enacted, however, and the means by which they are experienced, can evolve and develop over time depending on the emergence of technologies, interests and even the capacity for leisure time. Play and games have been studied as both artefacts (Huizinga, 1938; Caillois, 1958; Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971; Juul, 2005) and from the perspectives of how children practice, learn, and develop (Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1986, 1997; Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer, 2009); and as a leisure pursuit (Garvey, 1990). Chapter 2 positioned this thesis to explore the practice of raiding through the framework of gamic action (Galloway, 2006) and from the perspective of the intersecting moments of play in the persistent game environment. This chapter expands on this idea by considering the scope of gamic action in raiding in the persistent game environment and places it within the broader context of the development of the digital game.

This chapter draws on the recent development of games (computer-based games in particular) to contextualize raiding within the medium of the digital game.[23] It explores the playful use of things by considering the ways in which these digital games have developed primarily along two specific tracks: *device or console-based* development and *computer-based* development of games.   These two tracks exemplify the specificities in gamic action that I explore throughout this thesis. This chapter also considers the narrative impact on the development of digital games and, more specifically, the MMO and raiding gameplay.   While the MMO itself primarily emerged through developments in computer-based games, considering the parallel and often interconnected development of console- or device-based games can be helpful when considering notions of design, functionality, technology and narrative in digital games.   By considering the emergence of group raiding within digital games, I posit that raiding in an in MMO such as *World of Warcraft (WoW)* has developed its own specific gamic vocabulary and nuanced approach to gameplay.

While the earliest known or discovered artefacts of games and play may have been rudimentary in their design or execution, their form and function often reflected the era in which they appeared on the 'play-scene'. Backgammon, a board game with its roots in the Middle Eastern bronze age, is a good example of shifts and developments in the materiality of games over time: the discovery of the earliest artefacts of this game, some dating back to 2500–3000 BCE and made from materials such as stone, gems, bones or ebony, contrasts with how it can currently be played: as software on a computer.   Figures 3.1 and 3.2 provide an interesting contrast between the earliest discovered board game artefacts and the computer-based version of backgammon. The idea that a game can continue to be played for 5000 years, but that the form in which it is played might evolve to be played on new media, indicates the persistent nature of games.

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[23] In particular, the historical context presented in this section (pp. 66–77) has been drawn from the work done by other scholars around the history and development of play and games, leading toward the digital game, including the works of Caillois (1958), Sutton-Smith (1997), Kent (2001), Burnham (2003), Williams (2003), Juul (2005), Barton (2008) and Lowood (2009).

Figure 3.1. Examples of early board games (from Mesopotamia, circa 2600 BCE) made from lapis-lazuli, shells and bones. *Source:* C.L. Woolley, 1934.
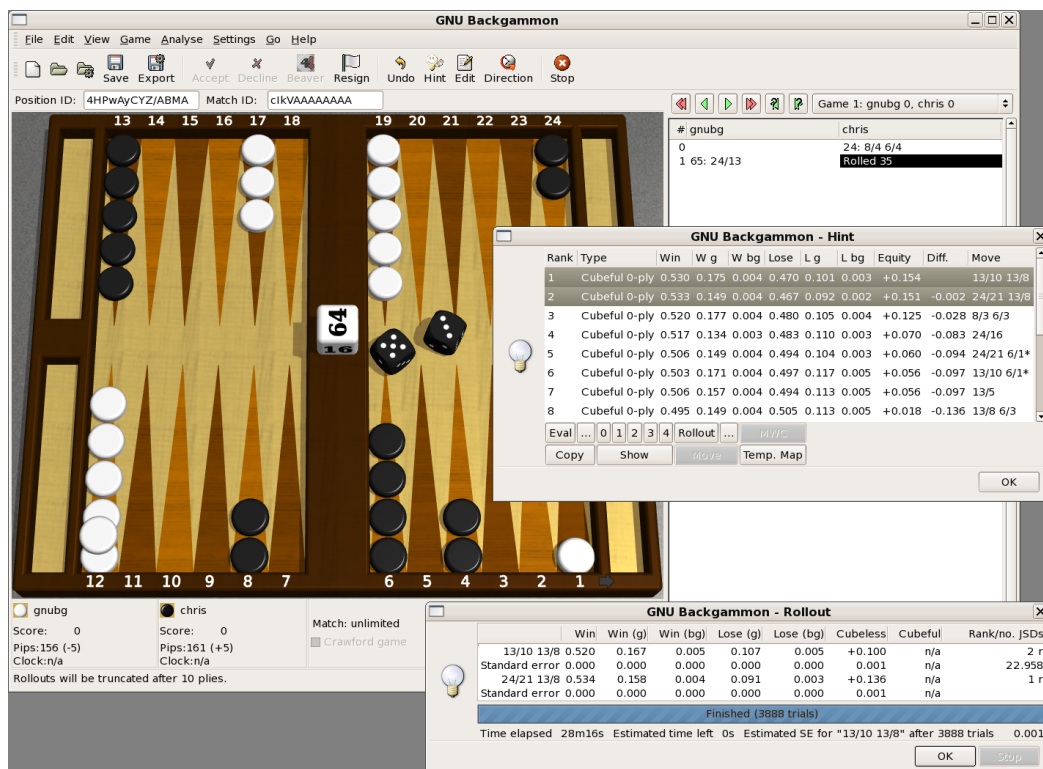
Figure 3.2. Example of a computer-based game of GNU backgammon. *Source:* GNU Backgammon, Wikimedia Commons, 2006.

This idea carries forward to the modern use of digital technology and the recent development of games. As video games historian Henry Lowood puts it, a consideration of the historical development of digital games such as console- and

computer-based games 'suggest an important, and at times underappreciated, relationship between exploratory work in computer science and the early history of computer games' (Lowood, 2009: 5).

The fact that the emergence of console- and computer-based games has paralleled the development of technologies like the television and computer may not seem surprising. Even an early consideration of play and digital games by play researcher Brian Sutton-Smith suggests an affinity between computers and games, 'it is probable, but not proven, that play at video games accustoms the player to the kind of activity that computers also require' (Sutton-Smith, 1986: 73). In fact the idea that playing a digital game (or video game, as Sutton-Smith writes) could make the player more adept at the technology on which it is built suggests an integral relationship between the *intended* purpose of created technology (using a computer for a work application, for example) and its *playful* purpose (using a television as a screen for a videogame console). One only has to look back to the earliest game artefacts to consider that while the *intended* purpose of stonemasonry, for example, might be for building a structure, its *playful* purpose might be to carve figures or other objects for a board game such as backgammon or chess. Thus we appear to have a habit of utilizing our advances in technology to support the necessities of life while also adapting them to our desire for playful everyday practices. And if our collective love of play and games means we look for new ways to play them, perhaps it's not surprising (or even novel) then that the technological advances of the past century have been paralleled by a prevalence for the playful use of digital things.

Developments in digital games

The television and computer are representative of technological developments in the 20th century. The development of digital games has followed the trajectory of these specific technological developments as well (Lowood, 2009). Perhaps that's why as the first mainframe computers were being created and installed at many universities in Europe and North America, games—localized to those university computers—were also being created and played.[24] One of the earliest computer-

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[24] Lowood refers to these types of games as, not surprisingly, 'university games' (2006; 2009a; 2009b).

based games was the 1952 game *OXO*, designed by University of Cambridge student A.S. Douglas, as part of his PhD thesis to illustrate human-computer interaction. *OXO* was designed as a player vs. computer game (what we'd later start to call PVE ['player vs. environment'] games) and played on an early modern computer, the EDSAC (Electronic Delay Storage Automatic Calculator). As a game that was designed to be playable on a machine and beyond its *intended* design and purpose, this early computer game indicates the route and nature that *computer-based games* were to take: while the game was designed to be part of the computer, its existence was actually parallel or supplemental to the actual, *intended* purpose of the computer. As computers began to leave the confines of university laboratories and become more widely distributed, so did computer games. A good example of this is the early computer game, *Spacewar!,* a game where two players fight each other through spaceships.[25] Developed on a DEC computer, *Spacewar!* (see figure 3.3 below) was distributed and shared amongst early users and eventually distributed with new DEC computers. (Lowood, 2009; Shaw and Warf, 2009) This new game was installed on all computers to be used as a diagnostic program for users (Markoff, 2002). This disseminated computer game—albeit initially distributed as a diagnostic tool—allowed players to engage in a separate, though shared gaming experience.

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[25] Interestingly enough, this video game is often incorrectly dubbed the 'world's first video game' (Markoff, 2002), which Russell himself (in an interview with VentureBeat as a YouTube video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnJvZHegg8I [last accessed July 29, 2012]) is often quick to point out as erroneous. It was the first widely distributed game, however, which may account for this mistaken impression of its origins.

Figure 3.3. *Spacewar!* game. *Source:* Joi Ito, Wikimedia Commons, 2007.

And these early developments in games were not limited to computers; other technologies were encouraging early forays into games-development innovation as well. As technologies relating to television were becoming more widely accessible, inventors were creating games such as the 1947 'cathode ray amusement device' (Goldsmith et al, US2455992) intended for game arcades that seems suggestive of an early console-type game, with controllable buttons that allowed you to fire at targets. Perhaps the most well-known early game was Pong, with its 'Pong machine' that became a hugely popular arcade video game and was eventually distributed for home use (Lowood, 2009). Most notable about these earliest developments were console-based games developing to transcend location and access while still remaining very specific to the task, so that players could engage in games in an arcade or by attaching a console device (such as the Pong machine from the early 1970s) to a television.

Both of these ways that digital games developed hint at the ways in which games are currently played and may have influenced the ways in which players engage with them. In the next section, attention is paid to how the device- or console-based game has developed.

The device- or console-based game

While the purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the historical development of the computer-based game and MMO in particular, it is also helpful to consider the development of the video and arcade game and its impact on computer-based games and vice versa. As earlier noted, console-based games relied on technologies such as the television or others that permit graphically or visually oriented gameplay. Like the *OXO* game from the 1950s, the screen became a medium through which games represented a manipulation of the technology's function. These different types of technologies may have also exerted an influence on the games' development themselves. In fact, Montfort and Bogost suggest that 'different display technologies have exerted creative force on the development of specific videogames.' (Montfort and Bogost, 2009: 34)

From a historical perspective consoles seemed a likely way for digital games to develop as televisions were becoming far more prevalent in homes by the 1960s as compared to the use of computers in the 1960s. The first home console-based systems were distributed into homes by the early 1970s, including some significant successes such as the Magnavox Odyssey in 1972, which actually permitted gamers to play more than one game at a time by altering the circuit logic and using novel techniques like plastic sheet overlays that adhered to the TV screen to alter the appearance or arrangement of the games played (Baer, 2005). By considering the earliest videogames as an adaptation of the technology on which it was built (in this case the television) suggests a shaping of an artefact for the purposes of play. Another noteworthy observation about these early console–based gaming systems is the idea of shaping the console itself to provide more and varied opportunities for play, again foreshadowing a predilection of the gamer for multiple forms and engagements in the play experience and a growing desire for complexity and depth while engaged in it (Juul, 2007).

This idea of the console becoming a facilitator of this new arena of visually and haptically oriented gameplay is well expressed when considering the Atari 2600, first launched in 1977, a game console that is largely credited with popularising the use of 'plug-in' cartridges and for experiencing widespread popularity due to

one game, *Space Invaders.* This suggested a symbiotic relationship between the game and console, where a popular game impacted the popularity of console and vice versa. *Space Invaders* was credited with helping establish what would often be referred to as the golden age of arcade video gaming, which lasted from approximately the late 1970s through to the mid-1980s (Whittaker, 2004), *Space Invaders, Frogger* and *Pac-man* representing some of the most popular games.

Narrative and the digital game

In addition to considering the impact of the console-based game on the digital game medium, the narrative has also had an impact on the digital game. I place this discussion here, between looking at the console-based game and reviewing the computer-based game, because these influences form a kind of bridge across the entirety of the digital game.

This section provides a brief consideration of the ways that the narrative, primarily as expressed through the board game (tabletop roleplaying games, in particular) and filmic and literary genres, have impacted the development of digital games. While narrative has come to mean many things and be employed in different ways by games scholars (Juul, 2005), what I mean by narrative is in the context of storytelling and narrative that Jenkins (2004) suggests as any kind of fictional world or setting. The consideration of the impact of genre, narrative, and story-development on games has been well considered in earlier research (Ryan, 2001; Juul, 2001, 2005; Ip, 2011a, 2011b), which in some ways acknowledges the significance and potential impact of forces beyond strictly the technological— namely the literary and other games themselves—on the historical development of digital games and hint at a few of the narrative relationships that have impacted the current canon of digital games and what, if any, impact this has had on the eventual emergence of MMOs such as *WoW*. I also note that while pre-existing narratives have undeniably impacted the later development of digital games, their ability to be smoothly translated into a digital game has had mixed success.

Digital games cover many narrative themes, from the reality-based (education games, such as *Dr Tools Maths Trainer*), brand-based (*LEGO™ Star Wars 3: The Clone Wars* is a good example of games that cover two brands at the same time: LEGO and the Star Wars franchise) or genre-based (*Mass Effect 3*, a science fiction adventure game). Other types of games more oriented toward the action or mechanics of gaming are widespread in the genres of games, such as first person shooters (typically set in a past-, present- or futuristic [more akin to science fiction, one might posit] military environment, with *Call of Duty* being a good example), real time strategy games (such as *Age of Empires* or *Starcraft),* or simulation games (such as *The Sims* or *FIFA Manager 12*). And beyond that is the idea of a multiplatform game—a game that might have been played on a board (such as the earlier discussion of the board game backgammon) but can now be played as a computer-based or console-based game. Everything from *Mahjong* and *Bridge* to *Chess* and *Solitaire* now have their digital equivalent, even removing the need for a gamer to engage in play with another person, with games offering the option of playing 'against the computer'.

While the digital game can be seen as its own medium Galloway, 2006) it has drawn influences from elsewhere as well. One link is that between the early tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs), such as *Dungeons and Dragons,* and digital games. Torill Mortenson, in her work comparing a multi-user dungeon (MUD) to *WoW,* references the way that the tabletop RPG 'heavily informed' a MUD and its roleplaying style (2006: 405). In fact much of the mechanics, structure and even play styles in MMOs owe their origins to how these early tabletop games were designed and played. Much of the lingo—hit points (HP), experience (EXP), for example—and play structure—classes, levelling up—are still used in many MMOs. In addition, many games designers credit their background and interest in gaming to these tabletop RPGs and their influence (PC Gamer, 2007). While the hereditary link between tabletop RPGs, MUDs and MMOs is unmistakable (Turkle, 1995; Mortenson, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Barton, 2008), these tabletop games also had an impact on the digital game beyond strictly contributing its mechanics or multiplayer/interactive gameplay experience. It was also the expansion and exploration of fantasy and science fiction storylines that helped drive the

development of certain types of digital games. If we consider the fact that the majority of tabletop RPGs are fantasy-genred and that the majority of MMOs are now fantasy-genred, as well, MMOs did not simply adopt the multiplayer mechanic of the tabletop game, they also adopted the storyline and atmosphere of the world in which the game was being played.

And finally, a consideration of the impact of certain literary (and filmic) genres on the design of digital games should be noted as well. An illustrative example would be the relationship between the seminal work of J.R.R. Tolkien, the expansion of the genre of fantasy fiction and the medievalist form and its subsequent emergence of narrative development in digital games. This relationship can also be considered in relation to the growing interest in science fiction when one looks at the franchise *Star Wars* and its successful development as a filmic genre and, subsequently, its development as a gamic narrative genre. These narrative relationships are suggestive of what Henry Jenkins has termed 'transmedia storytelling' (2004: 124) where 'each work' contributes 'to a larger narrative economy (124) and seem most commonly expressed through the narrative genres of science fiction and fantasy.[26]

Based on, perhaps, Jenkins' suggestion of transmedia storytelling producing a relationship between the narratives and the development of digital games, there have been those instances where an actual work of literary fiction or film has been developed into a digital game, more specifically, an MMO—*Lord of the Rings Online* and *Star Trek Online* are good examples of this. It should be noted, however, that while the popularity of a literary work (such as Tolkien's trilogy) may translate well into one new platform or genre (such as the films based on Tolkien's work), or even a particular type of digital game, such as *Battle for Middle Earth,* a critically acclaimed and commercially successful single-player computer-based game, it does not necessarily translate well into MMOs. No previously or elsewhere-branded literary works, films or television programs (*Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Age of Conan, Star Trek, Warhammer,* and even *Dungeons and Dragons*

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[26] This information is captured from http://mmodata.net/ (Version 3.8 of the MMO data report.) (Last accessed November 24, 2012.)

and *LEGO Universe* are good examples of these) have ever dominated the market share for MMO subscriptions. So while it appears that the fantasy and science fiction genres have both influenced and driven the development of the digital game, it does not necessarily correlate that a successful brand name results in a successful MMO (MMOdata.net, 2012).

The computer-based game

The computer-based game could be described as providing two forms of gamic action in its earliest development: solo play and group play. The earliest computer-based games were solo play for the most part. Until the desktop computer began to grow in popularity and access in the late 1970s, computer-based games were primarily limited in access and dispersion. It was not until the advent of desktop computers that computer-based games began to grow in number and popularity.

The earliest and most popular computer-based games were either created by hobbyists or clones of arcade games, such as *Frogger* or *Pac-man*. And as home computers began to grow in popularity, so did the development of original games for the computer. Actual 'gaming computers' emerged in the early 1980s, to be replaced by the wider proliferation of desktop computers that allowed for both gameplay and other computing functions. Early examples of games designed specifically for solo play on the computer included the first graphically based adventure game, named *Mystery House*, and other games like *King's Quest*, which were early computer-based graphical adventure games with 'quests' and items or treasures to find in order to succeed through the narrative and storyline to the conclusion of the game (see figures 3.4 and 3.5 for visual examples of these games). These hint at the later development of the MMO with its orientation towards quest completion and the usage of items for game navigation.

Figure 3.4. Screen shot of Mystery House (1980) with its rudimentary graphics and text-based descriptions and commands. *Source:* Roberta Williams, Wikimedia Commons, 2005.

Figure 3.5. Screen shot of King's Quest (1984) with its pixelated imagery and keyboard manipulated movements and actions. *Source:* Wikimedia Commons, 2005.

The earliest access to and design of the multiplayer or 'online' game came through university and research laboratory settings in the 1970s (though networking between mainframes had begun as early as the 1950s) where innovation and access to the earliest forays into the Internet or networked systems was taking place. In fact, Lowood (2009) asserts a relationship between computer science development and the development of the digital game, by observing that 'games grew out of the very institutions that played an essential role in defining timeshared and then networked computing in its early days. Games such as these exemplified the technical mastery of programmers and hardware hackers' (5). These sites of innovation, where computers were being developed and utilized for

multiple reasons, were also responsible for the earliest steps toward gamers linking together—for the first time and across far-flung geographical locations—to play in the same, online gaming environment. The convergences of these types of games—the solo player computer-based game and the group-based game—along with advances in computer hardware and software technology signalled a natural progression toward the collective form of play in the persistent game environment. The following section presents the development of the computer-based games toward MMOs, birthed out of the earlier types of computer-based games in the 1980s and 1990s and the rise of the Internet, and looks at the game mechanics and design of gameplay and more specifically raiding in *WoW*.

Emergence of MMOs

The MMO first emerged in the mid-1990s from game studios located primarily in North America and Asia. While graphical-based online virtual worlds or environments had started to appear as early as the 1980s[27], the earliest forms of MMOs as they are most commonly known today emerged in the 1990s, with this allowance of free movement around a 3D world and a persistent online game environment capable of hosting a large-scale player population[28]. What could be described as a fusion of the use of the internet with qualities of graphical computer-based games and console-based games, MMOs offer gamers access to a persistent game environment that allows for different forms of game play and experience including things like levelling-up a character (i.e., level 1 up to 85), combat, quests, role play, character development and end-game play content.

The precursor of the MMO was the text-based online games called multi-user dungeons (MUDs), which first emerged in the late-1970s. These were online and interactive where players used (and read) to interact and play with each other. The environment the gamer would navigate was 'textually described' rather than

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[27] Good examples of these earliest graphical online worlds or games would be *Habitat* (1986) and *Neverwinter Nights* (1991–1997), games that had elements of text-based games (like MUDs) with either static images of 2D movement, player interaction, and online persistence.

[28] Within 6 months of its launch, games like Ultima Online (1997) had a player population of 100,000, a player base representing a significant increase in population over earlier types of online games (Guinness, 2008).

visually represented, more akin to a piece of written fiction than what we might now consider a digital game.

The very first MUD was designed by programmers Rob Trubshaw and Richard Bartle at the University of Essex and first put 'online' in 1978. It's important to keep in mind that current notions of *online access* do not apply in the early MUD context; only a small group of players could access the game via specific and small interconnected networks (such as JANET or ARPANet[29]). Many early 'MUDders' were also tabletop RPG players, thus suggesting a link between MUDs and tabletop RPGs in the evolution of interactive 'roleplaying' games. As Internet access and computer usage expanded, more MUDs emerged. Even at their heyday, however, a MUD was typically only played by a small community of gamers[30]. This was due to the MUD often being dependent on word-of-mouth for popularity or lacking in available server space (so only a few could be logged in simultaneously) (Bartle, 1996, 2003). And despite online access growing in the 1980s, it was still relatively unheard of as a social medium. MUDs remained popular, however, with their popularity and prevalence peaking in the 1990s; they remain in existence to this day, though interest in them has waned, particularly in the face of the emergence of the MMO. Figure 3.6 below represents an example of part of a MUD screen.

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[29] The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network was created by a small research team at the head of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) of the United States Department of Defense, was the world's first operational packet switching network, and one of the networks that came to comprise the global Internet. JANET, originally a contraction of Joint Academic NETwork, is a UK-based computer network oriented toward education and research.

[30] Small here is really in relation to the current scale and popularity of many of the current MMOs. Some MUDs have boasted upwards of several thousand subscriptions.
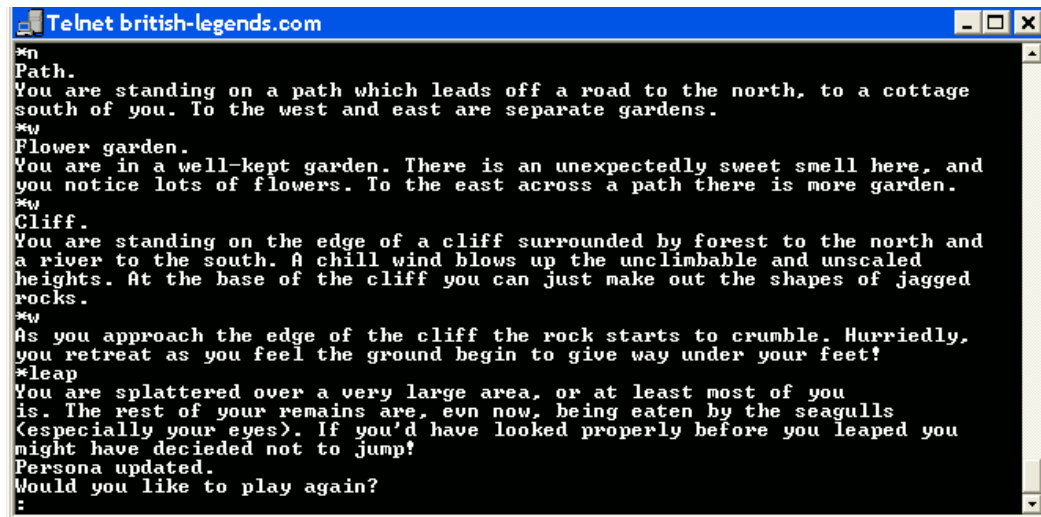
Figure 3.6. An example of the opening screen of MUD1. *Source:* MUD, British Legends, Wikimedia Commons, 2012.

With steady improvements in computers, software design and graphics throughout the 1990s, it seems inevitable that MUDs would go graphical[31]. This new merging of the online roleplaying game concept with visual graphics from other games, represented a further evolution in the development of the online roleplaying game. This can be considered from the perspective of additional parallel developments in other game genres and platforms that took place in the 1980s and 1990s as well, These other types of computer games and genres were usually graphical in nature, like first person shooter (FPS) or real-time strategy (RTS) games. They were graphical in nature, unlike MUDs; but like MUDs, however, they were on computers and even a few (like FPS games) had multiplayer functionality. The creation of the first MMOs can be seen as a merging of the graphical nature of games like *Age of Empires* or *Doom* with the persistent gaming environment of a MUD. It wasn't just that gamers could now see a graphical representation of a fantasy world, it was also a world in which gamers could log in to online game servers and simultaneously navigate the game environment and interact with each other. Figure 3.7 below is a screen shot of game play in *Ultima Online,* the first MMO[32]; the screen shot was taken in 1999.

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[31] Called so by Richard Bartle in 2003 when endeavouring to make the distinction between text-based MUDs and these newly emerging virtual games.

[32] In fact, the term 'massively multiplayer online roleplaying game' (MMO) was first coined by Richard Garriott, the creator of *Ultima Online,* in 1997. There is some debate (Bartle, 2010) about whether this was the first MMO as opposed to the first commercially successful MMO. Regardless, its impact is widely considered as seminal and influential in the development of subsequent MMOs.

Figure 3.7. Screen shot of game play from *Ultima Online,* 1999. *Source:* Origin, 1999.

These early MMOs (and one might suggest all MMOs even to this day) may not have been embraced by all MUD gamers[33]. For those who preferred MUDs to MMOs, the idea of a visually represented world (rather than one that is narratively and textually described) forcing a specific and predetermined visual experience on the gamer may have seemed more limited, while a text-based game may have allowed for a more authentic and creative experience in a roleplay-intensive environment that required imagination and descriptive abilities to adequately exist in the MUD. As Mortensen notes in her discussion of WoW being the 'new MUD', while 'both WoW and MUDs show a kind of creativity' a major difference between the two online game genres is the function of that creativity (Mortensen, 2006: 411). MUDs generally revolve around certain functionality that allows for and often expects roleplay, world building or other creative input; while an MMO like WoW will permit creativity but not generally be designed around that goal.

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[33] Having completed extensive research into MUDs and their gamers, Mortensen (2006: 411) hints at the 'love-hate' relationship between players of MUDs who have not played MMOs and those who have moved to them, 'Although there is probably a majority of players from original MUDs who do not play WoW, there are too many who do to ignore the position of WoW as the new common gaming ground.'

Like a MUD, an MMO is an interactive, online-based persistent gaming environment where players have continuous access to game content; its main difference is its graphical nature and its 'massive' scale, endeavouring to draw players in the tens of thousands at the minimum. Any player who has access to the game software and adequate technology can play the game. Many MMOs are subscription-based products, and often require that gamers buy the initial installation software. MMOs accommodate anywhere from tens of thousands of gamers to millions. Due to the large numbers of gamers, MMOs often provide access to their games via multiple servers; this helps manage the game population while not overloading game servers. Unlike a more conventional game where there is typically a beginning, middle and end, an MMO is a persistent environment where a gamer may 'begin' the content, but the content itself is intended to last indefinitely; the concept of 'end' in an MMO applies when a gamer just stops playing the game.

MMOs have grown significantly since those early forays into the new medium. Early data indicates that MMOs began with a global subscription rate of approximately 100,000 (the majority of which was held by one MMO, *Ultima Online)* and with the appearance of additional MMOs since the late 1990s and the growing appeal among gamers for this type of game play, subscription rates are now (as of mid-2012) estimated at approximately 22 million worldwide.[34] Most MMOs require players to purchase and/or download game software and then sustain their membership by paying a monthly (or periodic) subscription. Among the MMOs that enjoy at least one million or more subscriptions, only one, *Runescape,* is free to players; the other four MMOs that have over one million subscriptions—*World of Warcraft, Lineage, Lineage II* and *Aion*—are all designed around the paid subscription format.

While the orientation of an MMO is interactive, allowing gamers to play simultaneously with other gamers across far-flung regions globally; not all MMOs

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[34] Based on data collected on http://mmodata.net. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

have a global subscriber base. Some have a geographically regional focus of gamers, such as *Lineage II,* a game that primarily consists of gamers located in Korea, or be more globally widespread, such as *World of Warcraft.* Most MMOs follow specific kinds of narrative genres such as the fantasy, science fiction or superhero. Some MMOs are geared toward children (such as *Toontown Online* or *Pirates of the Caribbean Online),* some are geared toward mature audiences (*Age of Conan* was released with an 18+ advisory) and some are intended for more general audiences (*World of Warcraft*). Some MMOs have been designed and built around a specific film franchise or book series, such as *Star Wars: Galaxies, Pirates of the Caribbean Online,* or *Lord of the Rings Online.*

The persistent landscape of the MMO may appear contradictory at first. It seems solitary yet widely populated; static yet fluid; immersive yet tedious; it is virtual yet substantial.[35] An MMO appears two-dimensional yet its environment morphs, adjusts, and adapts in a way that *outside world* landscapes generally cannot. Gamers can manipulate the game space; and the space in turn affects the game play experience. In the game world activity seems constant. Gamers perform gamic actions and interact with each other to shape the MMO.   In the online game space activity seems constant. Not only does the landscape change and evolve, but players' gamic action can help shape the diegetic game environment. These very moments function in both conventional and unconventional ways, both interacting to shape the space and game play experience. How each player interacts with his game space is as different as how each person may interact with outside world space. This may partly be a result of game design and partly due to player individuality. And these gamic actions (as described by Galloway [2006]), can function for many reasons, including the gamer's need to carry out mundane tasks solely for the goal of attaining a broader access to the gaming space.

Mortensen describes an MMO as 'eclectic' which opens it 'up for a very diverse set of use' (2006: 411). A consideration of this eclectic and varied usability is the intent

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[35] This notion of the movement and space of the gamespace—in the raiding areas in particular—will be explored in more depth in Chapter 6, where I map the raiding gamespace.

of this section. In the case of many early MMOs (and for many current MMOs, as well) game outcomes were designed to be often dependent on a multitude of gamic action. As a result, the MMO involves many layers of action and interaction—either with other individuals or with the game space itself. As stated earlier, an MMO is a persistent, online game environment where gamers can navigate the game's world, complete any quests (or tasks) required to increase their character's levels, and engage in other events or activities, including large group events or special storylines. While not all MMOs have the exact same features, certain things are consistently present in their design. While the format and intent of the MMO may differ (*EVE Online* has a science fiction format, for example, while *Age of Conan* is designed around the Conan the Barbarian book series[36]), the following features can be considered core components of the MMO, most particularly the online aspect and the interactive nature of the game.

- *They are persistent and played online.*

Two fundamental features of an MMO are its access and playability online and its persistence as a game world designed to never end. Designed to be played via remote servers that gamers 'log into' via the Internet, MMOs are not designed for offline play.

- *They often involve an ongoing or progressive storyline within a fictional world.*

Narrative is significant in the online persistent gaming experience, both from the game designer and games research perspective (Juul, 2005; Ip, 2011a, 2011b). In the case of some MMOs, the narrative is driven by a pre-existing franchise, such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic* or *Star Trek Online.* Fuelled by the storylines of popular transmedia (Jenkins, 2004) franchises, the MMO can draw a pre-existing fan base. In the case of MMOs like *World of Warcraft,* the game's mythology and narrative may be less familiar to new players (who never played the previous

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[36] This game is built around the character of Conan the Barbarian, a character created by Robert E. Howard whose stories about Conan first being published in the *Weird Tales* magazine starting in 1932.

single player computer-based games in the *Warcraft* series), but it is no less rich or complex than those that come from more widely known brand name genres. The narrative is built into the quests, activities and other gamewide events, including the large-scale world-altering events. For any MMO, its narrative can strongly influence the very scope and design of the game. The very nature of an MMO, with its always-developing persistent world, provides for a progressive storyline that rarely stays put. From character creation and role or profession selection, the storyline is integral to an MMO. Immersion in and exploration of that storyline is avidly pursued by some MMO players, to the extent that the 'roleplaying' aspect of the game experience takes precedence over other aspects of the game, such as the achievements or levelling up that is highly prized among other gamers. For roleplaying-oriented gamers, the MMO's storyline has a crucial role to play for their game playing experience. Not all MMO players are known for their interest in roleplaying, however[37]. For some, the background and its storyline function less as a platform from which to develop your own character's identity and storyline, however, but more as a vehicle that provides outcome and reward-driven experiences and events, such as pre-written quests or large-scale group encounters. Regardless of the level of or motivation for interest in the storyline of an MMO, it is integral to the game's diegetic platform.

- *There are often animated, graphically designed physical environments*

MMOs are visually graphical by design. They are often visually distinctive environments, which are often reflections of the science fiction or fantasy genre that the MMO depicts—sweeping landscapes, dramatic intergalactic views, and fantastical geography that often defies reality (such as islands floating in the sky, bottomless chasms) (see figures 3.8–3.12). They can also have a cartoonish element, reliant on bright, vivid colours and a fanciful terrain (see figure 3.13). And as was mentioned above, the landscape can and does shift and change in relation to the developing storylines.

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[37] I note these distinctions based on my own findings during the course of this research, where none of the raiders I played with and interviewed had expressed any interest in roleplaying.

Figure 3.8. Space view in *EVE Online. Source:* CCP, 2011.

Figure 3.9. Charred landscape example in *World of Warcraft. Source:* MMO Site, 2011.

Figure 3.10. Example of floating islands in *World of Warcraft. Source:* Author, 2011.

Figure 3.11. Lake and mountains in *Aion. Source:* Author, 2011.

Figure 3.12. Rugged terrain and attacking monster in *Star Wars: The Old Republic.* Source: BioWare, 2012.

Figure 3.13. Cartoon-like landscape example in *Lego Universe. Source:* IGN, 2010.

- *Players can customise their character.*

While the terminology and specific details vary between games, MMOs provide players with the opportunity to customise their character. In the case of games

like *World of Warcraft,* for example, players can specialise their race and gender (male or female; human, elf, orc and troll, for example); class (warrior, mage, priest and so on); war faction (horde or alliance); and professions (tailor, blacksmith, miner, herbalist, etc.). Within each class are further degrees of specialisation that allow players to vary from being a damage dealing fighter to being a healer.[38] This mechanism allows for variation in the gameplay experience and allows for extensive, ongoing character development, an important feature of a persistent game environment.

- *Levelling up is a core component of the game.*

The ability to progress and develop a character is central to an MMO. Characters typically begin at level 1 and progress upwards, often to a level cap. As was mentioned earlier, this idea of character progression is integral to an MMO and its persistent environment. This idea is explored in more depth below, when looking at the specific experience of levelling up in WoW.

- *Group interaction or action is possible.*

MMOs are built around interactive activities. And while solo play exists in an MMO, a distinctive expansion from a single user computer-based game is its inherent group play design element. Some of the most significant events in an MMO require a group of players to participate together, and often cooperatively, to achieve the activity's set outcomes. MMOs often provide opportunities for group-based player vs. player (PVP) activities as well, where groups of players compete against each other in arena-like or battleground settings.

- *Players can often manipulate the game space in order to move through it.*

The size and scale of an MMO is often expansive and the ability to move through the game space at an accelerated pace is integral. MMOs often provide players

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[38] See the section below (pp. 92–94) for more specific information on the ways that players can specialise in *World of Warcraft*.

with a means by which to easily navigate and manipulate the game space, with vehicles or vessels that transport them quickly or easily. Even within a game like WoW, players are typically found running within the game rather than walking. (In fact, while walking is doable in WoW, it is not the default movement speed for players.) Many MMOs provide players with mechanisms for instantly relocating to predetermined locations.

- ### *The game space has a visual means of displaying gamic information.*

In many MMOs, an important feature is the game's user interface (the UI)—the means by which the player interfaces with (or manipulates) the game space itself. Many MMO game interfaces place the actual game environment in the middle of the screen (with the potential for other players to be navigating the same space) and a purposeful arrangement of buttons and other game actions are placed around the periphery of the game screen. See figures 3.14 and 3.15 below for examples of game screen interfaces in two MMOs, *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*. While a manipulation of the screen interface is possible in many MMOs, some underlying elements of the UI remain. (The role of the UI in raiding is addressed in Chapter 6.) There will always be a way for the player to view the game space. There will also always be a way for the player to input game commands and interact with the space and other players, be it to complete game quests, attack enemies or chat with other players.

Figure 3.14. Example of an *EverQuest* user interface screen. *Source:* Sony, 2003.

Figure 3.15. An example of a *World of Warcraft* interface screen. *Source:* Author, 2010.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, Galloway (2006) references the complicated nature of the multiplayer game space, particular in relation to how it enacts and engages with the moments of gamic action. This overview of the core aspects of the game

suggests these complex ways in which the diegetic and non-diegetic are arranged and engaged with in the persistent game environment. The visual display (in the form of the interface) is a good example of this overlapping dynamic between the diegetic and non-diegetic (see figure 3.15 above) with the game world dominating the visual display (diegetic) and the information and playing buttons displayed and arranged for and by the player around the UI's periphery (non-diegetic). And this complexity will be further considered in the following section where I look at both the origins and scope of WoW and how raiding functions within the game space.

Exploring *WoW* gameplay

World of Warcraft was launched in November 2004 and has enjoyed significant success since its launch. It now enjoys the majority share of the MMO subscription market[39] and Blizzard Entertainment, publishers of WoW, announced in a 2012 press conference that it had just more than 10 million subscribers worldwide (Holisky, 2012). WoW subscriptions had peaked at 12 million in 2010 (Blizzard, 2010) when Blizzard released Russian language game servers and popularity for the game had grown in China by 2010 (Fletcher, 2010). Competition from other games and MMOs may have contributed to the drop in subscription rates as compared to 2010, though the numbers appear to be remaining steady at 10 million (Holisky, 2012). With even more game servers being translated into other languages (Italian and Portuguese being the most recent additions) and another game expansion expected to come out in September 2012, global subscription numbers are likely to see even more shifts.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the idea of *gamic action* has been a particularly helpful way of thinking through the complexity of gamic action in the persistent game environment of the MMO. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the nature and structure of narrative and gamic action within WoW. It will first look at forms of diegetic gamic action in the form of its narrative, character, scope and procedural development and then look at the examples of how non-diegetic

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[39] MMO Data. http://www.mmodata.net/. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

action is portrayed in WoW through non-diegetic action around gameplay and the unexpected events that can transpire.

WoW is built around a complex fantasy-inspired mythology, much of which appears in a medieval-like setting and is oriented toward conflict, magic and epic struggles against evil. Like much else in the fantasy genre, WoW has its array of races and a variety of magical allies and foes. The foundational story of WoW is embedded in the 1994 game, *Warcraft,* where humans are pitted against orcs, who are trying to invade the human kingdom named 'Azeroth.' What ensues (over time and various game expansions) is a series of conflicts, where other races are enlisted in the conflict on either side, with humans, dwarves, night elves, worgen and gnomes joining forces as the Alliance, and the Horde faction representing orc, trolls, tauren, undead and goblins. As the conflict continues, the geographical area of the game expands and additional storylines emerge.

Characters in *WoW* form an affiliation with a particular class in the game. The classes currently available are: death knight, druid, hunter, mage, paladin, priest, warrior, warlock, rogue and shaman[40]. Each class has specific abilities and within each class a certain number of specialisation can be put in place. There are often three major types of roles that characters can assume—the healer, tank, and damage dealer. As WoW is designed for both solo and group play, groups often work well if there is a balanced representation of roles. The druid class is a good example of versatility in specialisation and group roles (though this will be further explored in Chapter 6), as demonstrated below:

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[40] A new monk class became available with the latest game expansion of WoW released in September 2012.

Druid

Description: Druids harness the vast powers of nature to preserve balance and protect life. With experience, druids can unleash nature's raw energy against their enemies, raining celestial fury on them from a great distance, binding them with enchanted vines, or ensnaring them in unrelenting cyclones. (Blizzard, 2012)

Possible roles: Tank, Healer, Ranged Magic Damage Dealer, Melee Damage Dealer

Specialisations: Balance—Feral—Restoration

A druid is a particular class playable by night elves, worgens, taurens and trolls. A druid utilizes nature to cast spells and affects intended to either attack enemies or protect or heal allies. Druids have an ability to assume other animal forms that enable their particular abilities—bear form for tanking, owl or cat form for damage dealing, or tree form for healing. While any druid character can heal, cause damage or tank, they will specialise their character (using the specialisations available to them [feral for tanking; balance for damage; restoration for healing]) in order to excel in a certain ability, such as if a player's primary role on a raiding team is to be a tank. This kind of diversity and specialisation is distinctive to gamic action in the persistent game environment like WoW, with about 30–40 types of classes and specialisations available to players, creating a series of rich and immersive diegetic machine and operator actions. And characteristic to the way in which Blizzard has continued to complicate the game by adding further richness to its persistent game environment, another class, monks, have been made available with the latest expansion of the game in 2012.

It is not only in the creation of new ways to engage in gamic action through class of ability that evolves and develops in the persistent game environment. The character a player can create evolves as well. During the 2007 expansion of WoW, named 'The Burning Crusade', Blizzard introduced two new races, blood elves for the Horde and draenei for the Alliance. These races' mythology and reason for joining with either side was 'written' into the overriding storyline of the game. New races came out with the third expansion of *World of Warcraft,* 'Cataclysm', worgens and goblins, along with the ability for characters to level up from 80 to 85. A new race has been released with the latest expansion of WoW, the pandaren, a panda-like race and players can now level up from 85 to 90. See figures 3.16–3.18 below for visual examples of these races.

Figure 3.16. Examples of orc race in World of Warcraft. *Source:* Blizzard Entertainment, 2012.

Figure 3.17. This image includes examples of WoW races, along with their associated iconography. These were the entirety of WoW races up until December 2010, when two additional races (goblins and worgen) were introduced to the game (*see* figure 3.18 below). *Source:* Blizzard Entertainment, 2007.

Figure 3.18. Visual examples of goblins and worgens, new races added to WoW in 2010. *Source:* Author, 2010.

The experience of the non-diegetic in the WoW environment is expressed and experienced in a variety of ways, particularly when considering the ways players access and configure the game in the form of subscribing to play the game (for access), configure and install the game (for content), or refine and customize their game space (for performance), all of which represent examples of *non-diegetic operator acts. Non-diegetic machine acts* in WoW are often represented through the non-game related, yet play impacted difficulties and unexpected events that often occur around and within the game and are also those system-driven elements that enable gamic action in WoW to take place. For example, internet connectivity is necessary to access the game space, though it may not be diegetic. For many WoW players, there are unexpected and often unwelcome events that can impact gameplay adversely: *game lag* (delay or disruption to the smooth flow of the game due to internet or game server delays) and *RNG* (random 'bad luck' where a group might unexpectedly fail in a dungeon run or a player might make an unexpected or unplanned mistake in game) are both good examples of this. The player's access to or smooth engagement with *WoW* is at-times subject to the unexpected and unwelcome forms of 'actions performed by the machine but not contained within the narrow conception of the world of gameplay' (Galloway, 2006: 28).

WoW is a fantasy-based world spread over four major geographical regions or continents, three of which are in the main world of the game, named Azeroth. Figure 3.19 below is a map of Azeroth, with its three primary continents. Figure 3.20 is the map of Outland, a region that is accessed through a portal in the Eastern Kingdoms.

Figure 3.19. Map of Azeroth, *World of Warcraft*. *Source:* Blizzard Entertainment, 2010.

Figure 3.20. Map of Outland, *World of Warcraft*. *Source:* Blizzard Entertainment, 2010.

As with the conventional environment of the real world, WoW has its urban centres, rural locales and extreme terrain. New characters begin their existence in

the game from their designated start areas.   This is pre-determined and controlled, an example of the diegetic game (machine) act. For example, humans begin their gamic existence in a region called Goldshire, which is adjacent to Stormwind, the capital city of the humans. Players will often congregate in cities, particularly those that have practical access to key game services such as banks, auction houses, trainers and vendors.

Access to services can be a significant factor in where player populations choose to gather.   One early demographic study of *WoW* by Williams *et al* (2006) determined that during the earlier stages (so-called 'vanilla WoW') of game play in WoW, Ironforge, one of the main Alliance cities and the capital city of the dwarf race, was the most populated area of the game.   As these population gathering sites are determined by access to services, this can mean that some major cities or regions are more densely occupied while others could be described as 'ghost towns.' But other than these urban centres being constructed to look like cities and to include services, they don't match the conventional city.   There are no player residences and the narrative forms of gamic action (completing quests or participating in large group activity) are a less common occurrence within the city[41].   Players often use these gathering centres primarily to bide time between activities, socialise or run errands.

These limitations on the game's constructed environment are largely dictated by the diegetic intent of the game's designer.   For example, while a game designer may place a house or structure to create atmosphere and the semblance of life in the game environment, it will have limited functionality. See figures 3.21 and 3.22 below, illustrating a dilapidated house in the area called Duskwood (imagine a Halloween-like land with spiders, undead creatures and gloom). While the house can be entered and explored, as demonstrated in the captured images by the

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[41] There are some quests that are completed in the city, though they are less common than elsewhere in the game. Also, the cities of Stormwind. Orgrimmar and Dalaran have areas within them that allow for combat and group game play (players' access is limited by a portal and a minimum level). These areas are actually prisons within the city that have fallen into chaos (i.e., prison riots, attempted break-outs) and need a group of players to help restore order.

author, only one object can be interacted with—one of the barrels. This idea of the game space as a designed, manipulated and controlled space is significant in MMO game play and is particularly impacts in the raiding space. This is explored in more depth in Chapter 6 when I map the raiding game space.

Figure 3.21. An illustration of a character entering a constructed building in *WoW*. *Source:* Author, 2011.

Figure 3.22. A close-up shot of the interior of the constructed building in *WoW*. The only object the character can interact with is the barrel which is in the right corner of the room. *Source:* Author, 2011.

Levelling gameplay in WoW

Another aspect of *WoW*'s consistent success and popularity as a game could be attributable to the variety of ways that players can utilise and navigate the game itself. While this thesis is primarily interested in the gamic practices of raiding

gameplay, many other aspects of the complex persistent gaming environment bear mentioning as they do impact and shape all forms of play in the game.

WoW is designed as a 'levelling up' game, where characters begin at level 1 and progress[42] through a series of quests, monster killings, dungeons and character refinement on the way toward the level cap[43]. A character levels up by accruing enough 'experience' required for that level. The amount of experience (called 'XP' points in WoW) required for a 'level up' increases with each level, such that moving from level 1 to 2 requires only 400 XP, while going from level 37 to level 38 requires 62,400 XP. This is an intentional representation of the diegetic machine act (Galloway, 2006) integrated into the game design to slow down and render the levelling up process more complex. All ends need a beginning, and the beginning of gameplay in WoW quite typifies most MMOs. Players begin their navigation of the WoW game space by following a process of selection, providing a unique name for their character and then selecting its gender, faction, race, and class. This is the player's first ability for pre-shaping the game environment. In the following, I trace my own process of generation, selection and entrance into WoW as a new goblin warlock. This is done in an intentionally reflexive manner as I explore gamic action through my own engagement with beginning a new character. I recorded my observations as I quite literally navigated the login screen, character creation page and new player area. I have underlined a few parts of my own exploratory path through the 'beginning' of WoW gameplay for the following discussion into the interplay between beginnings, endings and the relationships between them. View video 3.1 below to follow the audio and visual path that this entrance takes.

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[42] There is an exception to this. During 'Wrath of the Lich King' expansion (2008), Blizzard introduced a new class, Death Knight, which players (as long as they already had other characters already at level 70) could create at level 55. This was aimed to help expedite the levelling up process so that players wanting to engage in endgame content with this new class could do so; it was also a value-added bonus for pre-existing customers, likely aimed at subscription retention.

[43] The level cap in WoW is currently set at 90; it shifted up to level 90 in the most recent game expansion in September 2012 titled *Mists of Pandaria*.
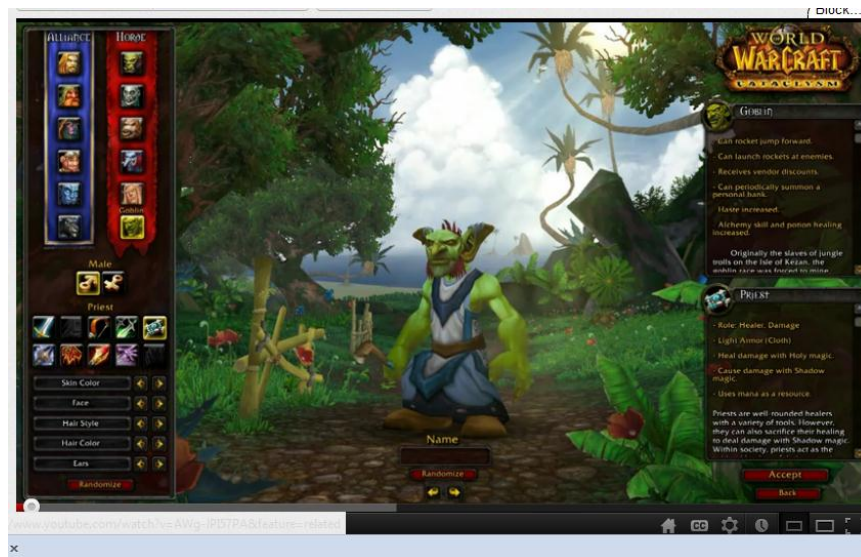
Video 3.1. Goblin creation and opening scene. Source: Shadowbeamx, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XlYM8-YrXI, 2010. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

As I pull up the login screen into WoW I am <u>bombarded</u> with sound. Sweeping cinematic music builds, crescendos, and fills my laptop speakers. <u>I feel, musically at least, like I'm on the verge of a great battle, crisis, or event.</u> This is the 'theme music' for WoW. And music continues in the background of the game. I log in and select 'new character' creation. A new screen pops up.

I select my side: I am Horde. The 'red' side—the 'uglier' races, the ones I remember thinking were 'evil' when I first started playing: the undead, the orcs, the trolls. Is that because Humans are on the Alliance (blue) side? Am I that <u>easily manipulated</u> by fantasy stereotypes? Maybe when I started, but now I know better. Goblin appears and I click it. A male Goblin is the default choice. I usually select the female version—is it a kind of projection of myself? The female version seem to project a softer, more attractive looking version of each race. Had the designers meant for my female Goblin to have eyelashes and lipstick to somehow <u>normalise her appearance? I can randomise her</u> or make her hair brown, red, white, blue. I go for neon blue. It brings out her green skin. She looks young to me, maybe no more than early 20s. I can age her a little, but I prefer her looking young. Is this my own need to project myself as the most stereotypically attractive version of myself? I don't know—I never really thought about it too much, aside from not wanting to look 'unappealing' to others. I know that with the 3rd person perspective <u>I'll always have my game view 'following' my character as she moves through the game space—I'll rarely ever see her face.</u> But other players could see me. If they wanted to zoom in, that is. Anyway, enough of that, time for a name. I've always liked to make my names seem like something parents would give to this character. What would Goblin parents name their

children? <u>Should I research this? Nah, I'll just pick something</u> that sounds remotely girly and somewhat appropriate. Oh wait, I need to pick her class first. Eight (out of the 10) to choose from. Warlock seems to fit. They are spell slingers and a bit evil. Why do Goblins seem evil to me? <u>They were slaves in this world,</u> it says in the little blurb about the race on the character creation screen, forced to mine ore for their overlords the Trolls, another playable race in WoW. But the ore had magical properties so Goblins gained intelligence and, it says, 'cunning'. So <u>there is a hint of the diabolical in the Goblin</u>. The potential to be clever and deceiving.. sly.. crafty. Yes, warlock makes sense. We cause Shadow and Fire damage. We drain souls. We have demons by our side to help us. Also, I know how to play a warlock and enjoy it. Back to the name. Waasa. Do they have it available on this server? Yes.   There she is: a cute, green, pigtail-wearing cartoonish figure with pointy ears and a little demonic imp by her side and a tranquil island with palm trees and an inviting looking beach in the background. <u>"Enter world" is my only choice, if I want to proceed.</u> The alternatives are "delete character" or go back. I'll enter.

A progress screen pops up as the game loads in the background. A blue line moves across to tell me how long (mere seconds) I should have to wait until the big cinematics begin. A new screen comes up… a narrator's voice appears. <u>Our birds-eye view perspective</u> takes in a tropical island. He tells me about the peaceful background of the Goblins living on south sea islands.. being ruled by a corrupt leader. And the narrator tells me that the future for these people (and the side they will eventually choose) is being dictated by events around the world and beyond the control of the Goblins. <u>My very appearance in the world has brought me to the beginning of the intentional storyline of this race.</u> Before me stand some other Goblins, one with a big exclamation mark hovering over her head.   Other NPC[44] goblins appear engaged in various activities around me. Some have functions, some I can interact with… I can move around and I can explore, I can even move away from this place, but I feel quite certain that my only way forward is to right click on this female Goblin before me to see what she has to say…. I see a screen pop up and another option to click on a quest so I can accept it and begin to progress and level up. I accept.

She tells me 'Don't try anything stupid.' Her voice has the distinctive clip of a New Yorker. The quest tells me that I have to find another goblin nearby. Foreman Dampwick. I look outside. He's standing on a barrel about 10 metres away. With a big question mark hovering over his head. I approach him. <u>I hand him the item</u> Sassy wanted me to deliver to him. It's a gift-wrapped 'bomb'. He gets a subtle reminder of needing to do his job, apparently, and I get 10 XP on my screen. One of the status bars on my screen—which tracks my experience needed and gained so far from one level to another—registers a 3% gain in overall experience to get to level 2. I also get offered some more quests by the Foreman. Two in fact.

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[44] Non-player character. These are diegetically placed game-designed 'characters' that players can often interact with.

The audible continues to permeate my gaming experience at this stage. Atmospheric sounds of the beach and sea in the distance, the repetitive activities of the NPCs around me, the sounds of workers in the distance. And music, a kind of lilting tune that then morphs into another tune. These must be the Goblins' theme music. <u>Each area and each race seems to have its own. I find a new place. I am rewarded with more experience for exploring.</u> My map also begins to fill in more the more I explore.

My first quest requires me to go around a working area and '<u>adjust' the attitudes</u> of 8 of the Trolls working in the mine. I'm supposed to actually apply a kind of shock treatment to the 'defiant trolls' to get them back on the job. Naturally my mind wanders to the earlier historical information I was given about the fact that the Goblins had been used to mine ore by the Trolls. I might not like this, but I have to keep going if I want to gain a reward for completing a quest and keep progressing through the levelling up process. I find some more trolls. The 'zap' is extremely loud, visually noticeable, and each troll emits a loud grunt as they are assaulted, but I get the benefit of seeing my quest quota fill up. Only 1 more to be done and go back and get my reward. I turn in my quest—my XP bar goes up dramatically. And off I go on another quest... this time I have to kill worms that are 'eating' the ore that's being mined. And I see to my glee that I get XP for not only completing the quest, but also for every worm that I slay. And before I'm done and ready to go back to turn in my quest, I have reached level 2! A bright flash of light covers me and I appear the same yet somehow changed, at least that's the feeling the visual evokes. I have a '2' by my name in the upper left corner and <u>my XP bar has gone back to zero again.</u>

And thus began my life as a new goblin warlock in WoW. I can say with certainty that my experience of this type of beginning as an established player and raider in WoW was different from what I first experienced as a new player in 2006 (see my account in the Introduction), but the feeling of *beginning something* is still present for every new character I create. Each time I create something new, I am presented—anew—with a set of preliminary non-diegetic and diegetic operator decisions to make. My own creation of a goblin, a new race in WoW as of December 2010, meant a new region to navigate ('<u>I find a new place. I am rewarded with more experience for exploring</u>'), a new set of naming conventions to consider ('<u>Should I research [naming my character]?</u>'), new aesthetics to think about (whether I should 'normalise' or 'randomise' the appearance of my goblins and my own reflection on whether I am 'easily manipulated' by the pre-existing notions in other literatures that goblins are 'evil' or ugly), and a new narrative to

follow ('<u>They were slaves in this world</u>'). I am engaged in the diegetic machine act. The quests are new. And yet, as a seasoned player, I know what to do. There is a familiarity in this newness. I have expertise in the diegetic operator act. I know that in order to move ahead to the 'levelling' stage of my raiding I must end this key beginning stage by completing a number of initial tasks and mastering these initial stages of navigation and game mechanic manipulation.

And so I proceed from the beginning through to the levelling process. And levelling presents its own kind of repetition of newness. My earliest experiences with this as a new goblin warlock were in the form of following and completing these early tasks: I '<u>hand him an item</u>', I '<u>adjust attitudes</u>', I '<u>have to kill worms'.</u> This kind of completion of tasks for rewards—even if the task seems extreme (such as my musing on the 'zap the lazy troll' quest)—is integral to the levelling up experience in a game like WoW. But levelling up is not merely limited to quest completion. Killing enemies and completing group dungeons (for 5 players at a time) also gives experience and can boost the levelling up process. But each new level signals a kind of simultaneous ending and beginning. Just as my character can never be level 1 again (the ending), so its progression to level 2 results in restarting each level (the beginning) at zero ('<u>my XP bar has gone back to zero again</u>'). The mechanics of the non-diegetic machine act surround me. And this cycle of progress, of ending and beginning, will continue for as long as I continue to play or until they reach the level cap. And this level cap does signal a kind of ending, though perhaps not as final as the word itself suggests. Probably the most striking reminder of the end of levelling is the sudden removal of the XP bar. What was once a constant reminder of progression from level to level has now disappeared as the character has reached the level cap.

And yet, despite this notion of an end of levelling, WoW does not end there for players. A common feature of the persistent gaming environment is what is commonly referred to as 'endgame', players that reach the game's level cap will often progress into a new form of gaming experience, one that is often intentionally designed by Blizzard and further developed by player choices and

interactions. Endgame, at its most basic, is what happens after a character reaches the level cap. In the case of an MMO like WoW, certain activities are always available at any level—be they completion of unfinished quest lines, resource collection, socialization, roleplay or exploration, for example—and certain activities are specific to the 'endgame' playing period, such as level 90-only raiding areas, dungeons, or PVP (player vs. player) arenas. Some quests and other resource or item building activities are also limited to characters at the endgame level. But probably the most notable kind of endgame playing is the goal of progressing through the latest raiding content. Raiding is often considered an endgame activity due to the interest by the majority of active raiders in the most up-to-date raiding content. For an 'endgame' player, the end is often the beginning of yet another phase in gameplay. And as the following section will explore, a big part of these choices in the realm of the end in a game like WoW relates to particular pathways toward play, some that overlap, some remaining separate, and all often shaping not only how a player experience the game but also how she might choose to identify with it.

Intersecting pathways of play in WoW

Play is expressed in different ways in a persistent game environment like WoW. Certain elements of play are game-designed and others are player-driven. While many players will partake in all forms of play in WoW, certain pathways will predominate. The aim of this section is to briefly highlight some predominant pathways of play that are often experienced by players to varying degrees and often all at once, and how they might intersect. It also touches on the ways in which players will take their chosen pathway(s) of play and identify themselves and each other, as in the way that one player, Torchia[45], highlights it as 'layers of playing'. This is yet another way in which the complexity of gameplay (the way that the player wants to play the game) is linked to the specificity of identity (how that player chooses to identify with that way of playing) that emerges through the action of playing.

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[45] Torchia is the character name of the player. Throughout this thesis I have opted to include, with permission, the names of players' character names (or a pseudonym if they requested anonymity). This felt more suited to the nature of the work, which is situated within the game environment.

Solo play: WoW players can often spend a lot of time playing alone: questing, resource gathering, exploring or travelling. While many players will play on their own at any given time during in-game play activity, some might specify themselves as solo players. These players are often also dubbed casual players by themselves or others in the gaming community since the production of solo play is seen as easier to engage in for players interested in intermittent, self-determined or a less time-constrained form of play, unlike the group-oriented play activities of raiding and PVP, as noted below, where the playtime and activities are more dictated and planned. I should note that many solo players will team up with others, either casually or through an organized effort within their guild affiliation, to participate in small group playing activities, typically in groups of five, completing 'dungeon' runs.

Roleplaying: Roleplay does happen in an MMO, but is a more limited number form of playing in WoW. Generally, roleplay is pursued by players on specific game servers (typically [though not exclusively] those designated as 'RP' servers) and generally follows a specific trajectory that is perhaps more focused on the creative (Williams *et al,* 2011) interaction of players more than an orientation toward the mechanics and events of the game itself.

PVP play: Player vs. player play is a well-integrated feature of WoW. In fact the storyline of WoW, with its origins in a conflict between two factions—the Horde and Alliance—actually means that players can, on specific game servers engage in PVP at any time with players on the opposing side. While this practice is less common in the game, other forms of PVP are quite actively engaged in such as arena and battlegrounds, both as an individual player and in groups. Like solo play and roleplaying, some players prefer to engage in PVP above other forms of gameplay and often devote less time to other types of gaming.

Raiding play: Raiding is another form of gameplay in an MMO like WoW. While I will explore the experience, practice and component elements of raiding in far more detail later in this chapter and more in subsequent chapters, I wanted to just touch on this as a predominant pathway of play in WoW. For players interested in cooperative team play against the game (commonly called PVE, or 'player vs. environment'), raiding is often a primary choice. Raiding allows for players to progress through what is usually considered challenging content and do so in larger than normal (10- or 25-player size) groups. Due to the significant time commitment, due to both time spent raiding and the peripheral activity around raiding, players that prefer to engage predominantly in raiding will often refer to themselves as 'raiders'.

Considering all of the pathways of play I have mentioned here, perhaps it is not surprising that there might be variation in the way that WoW gamers like to play. It may be tempting for the unfamiliar to paint a more uniform image of gamers having a similar approach to the purpose and intent of gameplay. But this does not appear to be entirely the case. Within WoW (and even the broader community), I have observed a kind of variation in perception among gamers about pathways of play and what it means to identify their own affiliation with the game. While I discuss this in greater depth in Chapter 5 where I look at experiences and expressions of formation within the raiding community, I take a moment here to consider the ways in which gamers identify their own pathway(s) of play and how that might impact their perception of the game itself and other players. During an interview I had with Torchia[46], a player who self-identifies as a raider from a Brazilian guild[47] Blood Legacy (a 10-man raiding guild), he raised a

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[46] All of the excerpted content from research participants in this thesis were collected on different media and platforms, including: text (using such services as Web site forums or messaging platforms), via email (between the author and research subject), IRC (a private or group internet relay chat, a type of online chat engine), Skype (either via voice or text), or VOIP (voice-over-IP, such as ventrilo or TeamSpeak). This will be denoted with all quoted material.

[47] In the case of Blood Legacy, in my discussion with members of this guild they all identified themselves as consisting entirely of Brazilian members (though some members were living in other countries such as Canada). While some guilds do have multi-national membership (such as European-based guilds or North American guilds), some are

particularly intriguing concept when he worked through his own notion of variation and pathways of play. He used the term 'layers of playing' while trying to describe the different experiences and perceptions of gameplay and players, within the same game. (The underlined emphasis below has been added by the author.)

> I switched floors here on my job so I met some new people and I caught them talking about wow, about levelling and stuff... typical newbies.
> I can't go tell them how Valiona[48] hard [mode] is tough because of X and Y, they'll be confused. <u>People play WoW differently and WoW embraces them all.</u>
> <u>WoW has layers of playing</u> and some of those layers can't understand others. So I really don't think a casual 5-men player [would] look up to me in some way. (Torchia, Blood Legacy [US], Skype conversation, April 2011)

From Torchia's perspective, this layering effect—which allows a game environment like WoW to attract and support players with differing goals and motivations—can cause inadequacies in understanding between different types of play and players, though he suggested it was more a problem in understanding by those whose experience with the game does not align with his (or seems inferior somehow) by using words like 'looking up' to hint at his perceived position (as a raider) as being *higher up* or *further along* in the progression of the game than newer or less experienced players the 'typical newbies' as he puts it. This notion of a hierarchy of roles seems built into the game itself as certain end-game activities are exclusively designed for players at the higher levels. An experienced raider would be familiar with activities geared toward the lower level or less experienced players (such as solo play) while a new player would not have experienced gameplay at the higher levels (like the typical endgame raiding content for those at the level cap). These layers of playing can relate to the broad span of experiences within WoW. The goal of 'fun' may exist for all, for example, but perhaps there are degrees to which this matters more and what the concept of fun means to a gamer during his or her experience of gameplay. In the case of

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specifically and overtly linked to a particular language, culture, or national affiliation, such as in the case of Blood Legacy. I will use this process of identifying guilds by their nationality, regional, or cultural/linguistic affiliation (further explained in Chapter 4 and the introduction) throughout the thesis.

[48] Valiona and her sibling dragon Theralion make up one of the raid instance fights for level 85 players. These fights cannot be encountered by players under level 85.

raiding, perhaps this is seen as 'fun' for an active raider but not seen that way for a PVP player. This can also relate to what any given strand of the gaming community (take the raiding community for example) has designated as its norms and values, something I will explore in far more depth in Chapter 5 when we discuss the values and expectations that raiding groups place on their members. What a raider might perceive as acceptable behaviour and effort to meet their gameplay goals could be seen as unhealthy, irrational or even bad playing by another gamer who perhaps considers him or herself a casual player.

As stated earlier in this section, these predominant pathways of play are not enacted in isolation. A player, to borrow from Torchia above, is engaged in navigating these 'layers of play' as part of their gameplay experience, particularly if they are starting anew (as I myself explored in my own 'new character' creation earlier in this chapter). A player will also identify a common type of association, however, with what type of gameplay they prefer to engage in. These associations with pathways of play can often define a player (either willingly or not) and can sometimes impact their approach to socialization (or lack thereof) within the persistent gaming environment. While specific research into the subtle nuances between the experiences, identity and enactments of the solo player and PVP player in WoW reaches beyond the scope of this thesis, it appears noteworthy that while a player might identify him or herself primarily as one type of association—such as the PVPer or the raider—that is not a limiting factor in that player's approach to gameplay. The rich complexity of the persistent game environment leads to a rich complexity in the pathways to play.

Raiding in *World of Warcraft*

This section builds on this chapter's earlier discussion where I explored the history of games, paying particular attention to the development of the digital game and how the MMO's development fits within that process. As this thesis is oriented specifically around the experiences of raiding gameplay, I would like to provide an overview of how raiding has developed within *WoW* and how it functions as a pathway toward play. Raiding has long constituted a play-

experience of the persistent game environment, no less so with regards to *WoW*. Raiding has been built into the content design of *WoW* since its inception as an MMO. And there are a number of distinctive features that set raids apart from the other elements of an MMO. Primary amongst those is the size of the group activity. Raids are designed for large groups (10 and up) of players to engage in and often involve a very challenging game combat experience (with a low rate of success and a high rate of failure[49]). Raiding is also designed as an 'end content' activity intended for the highest level characters, meaning players need to reach the game's level cap before being able to form groups to raid; indeed the content of a raid is designed for the skill, gear and ability level of the level-capped player. They are meant to be a complicated, large-group activity that promotes ongoing play and the acquisition of items that enhance the player beyond the more obvious gamic endeavours that come from questing and levelling up from 1 to the game's level cap. As the game at the level cap does not permit a further increase of level, or introduce new abilities, the only avenues remaining to enhance a character lay in 'better gear' and more challenging game events.

Raiding is an optional part of the diegetic gamic experience, meaning that participation in raiding is not required to level up a character or to participate in the game in general. Raiding instances include at least one and up to as many as a dozen 'bosses'. Bosses are the unique, high level enemies designed by the game. They present as a challenging foe that can typically only be defeated by a group of players, as opposed to the regular monsters that players can more easily defeat on their own (as long as they are close to or below their own character level). Raid instances are constructed gamic environments that have challenging 'bosses' and their followers (often called 'mobs' or monsters). These raid instances are located in castles, underwater caves, keeps floating in the sky, abandoned cities and more.

As the popularity for WoW grew, so did its raiding. During beta testing, groups of players had already formed social networks (called and organised in game as guilds), many of which were formed to help facilitate these large group activities.

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[49] The experience (and action) of success and failure is further explored later in Chapter 6 (pp. 250–251).

Nessaj[50], a leader of one of the most successful raiding guilds in WoW raiding history, Nihilum, described the origins of the guild: 'Nihilum was founded on the first day the servers opened really.' Players were ready to start raiding very quickly through these pre-established social groups, which meant that within weeks of the game's launch groups were already entering raiding instances and defeating the bosses. For guilds like Nihilum, levelling up became the barrier to overcome for players primarily focused on raiding. As Nessaj recollects, the competitive nature that comes with raiding (something I explore in in Chapter 7) was the only element of WoW's game design (aside from player-versus-player activity) that appealed to him, 'the competition stuff in WoW is very drawing.' Synti, a raider in the raiding guild Paragon explains that raiding was always his primary interest in playing WoW, 'I started raiding as soon as it was possible.'[51]

As interest in raiding grew, more of the WoW gaming community began to follow the progress of certain high achieving raiding guilds (such as Nihilum mentioned above) and Web sites began to crop up where players could track and post about each other's progress. An international rivalry appeared to emerge between certain top guilds, namely between Nihilum, a European guild; Death and Taxes, an American guild; Forte, a European guild; and SK Gaming (also known as Curse), a European guild. Players began to follow their progress as these groups all raced to be the first to achieve the 'world first' kills of the raid bosses. A 'world first' is achieved if you are the first group in the game (on any game server in the world) to successfully kill a boss.[52]

The second game expansion for WoW was titled 'Wrath of the Lich King' and was launched in November 2008 worldwide. It included a new geographic area, a new set of dungeons and raids, and the ability to reach a new level cap of 80. By this time, Blizzard, aiming to ensure its casual players—which comprised the bulk of

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[50] All content from my interview with Nessaj came during a Skype text interview, December 2010.

[51] Interview with Synti, Paragon, IRC text interview, January 2011.

[52] Other examples of important 'first' milestones for raiding groups are 'server firsts' (the first group on a particular game server to kill a boss for the first time).

its subscription base—could also engage in the raiding content like the more 'hard core' raiding players, had created a two-tier approach to raids, calling them 'normal' and 'heroic.' The fights were with the same boss, but the so-called heroic level included more complexity and difficulty and was designed to challenge and appeal to the more competitive raiding groups. Each boss fight was now doable in 10- and 25-player groups. Therefore Blizzard had deftly designed a way for the same raid to be experienced in four different ways, thus extending the accessibility of the raid content and, presumably, widening the player base that could engage in what was often viewed as the most challenging content in the game. Along with the new changes to content came more raiding guilds and the ability, in more depth, for ranking Web sites to track raiding guild achievements. One example is the Web site wowprogress.com (see figure 3.23). On this site, the raiding success of any guild on any server throughout the world is tracked and posted.

Rank	Guild	Realm	Progress	Criteria
1	즐거운공격대 (25)	KR-Kargath	8/8 (H)	45000.00
2	Stars (25)	TW-Crystalpine Stinger	8/8 (H)	44333.33
3	In extremis (10)	KR-Norgannon	8/8 (H)	44000.00
4	Blood Legion (25)	US-Illidan	8/8 (H)	43833.33
5	DREAM Paragon (25)	EU-Lightning's Blade	8/8 (H)	43833.33
6	Method (25)	EU-Xavius	8/8 (H)	43833.33
7	Экзорсус (25 r)	EU-Свежеватель Душ	8/8 (H)	43833.33
8	Silent (10)	EU-Illidan	8/8 (H)	43666.67
9	Exodus (25 r)	US-Cho'gall	8/8 (H)	43666.67
10	Wings of Aurora (25 r)	TW-Howling Fjord	8/8 (H)	43666.67
11	vodka (25)	US-Alterac Mountains	8/8 (H)	43333.33
12	Интервенция (10)	EU-Свежеватель Душ	8/8 (H)	43333.33
13	Envy (25 r)	EU-Auchindoun	8/8 (H)	43333.33
14	Ground Zero (25)	KR-Azshara	8/8 (H)	43000.00
15	Wraith (25)	EU-Sargeras	8/8 (H)	43000.00

Figure 3.23. This is a screen shot of the globally top-ranked raiding guilds in WoW. *Source:* http://www.wowprogress.com. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

Raiding continues to be a predominant feature of any new content released through these expansions. And this shows no sign of changing, as the latest

planned new expansion of *WoW*, titled 'Mists of Pandaria', which will include new raiding areas being brought out for release in September 2012 (Starym, 2012a). My intent in providing this brief historical account of the development of raiding in *WoW* was to indicate this long-term and well-established relationship that the persistent game environment has had with raiding as a form of gamic action—for a game like *WoW,* raiding has always been integrated into its gamic design, something that seems indisputable with the earliest well-known raiding guilds, such as Nihilum, being able to trace their lineage back to the formal launch of the game itself. Its complexity encapsulates not only the richness in ways to play the game, but also represents the many moments of gamic action that are evident in raiding gameplay. This will be explored in more depth in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This chapter traced the trajectory of games and placed computer- and console-based games, and the MMO and raiding in particular—the primary subject of this thesis—within the broader framework of games and other influential forces and to identify the particularly playful way that have appropriated material objects to support our current predilection to the digital game. We glanced, briefly, at the earliest known gamic findings in order to appreciate the most modern of gamic developments, not merely to suggest the pervasive and possibly timeless relationship that humans have had with this most playful of pursuits, but also to suggest that while the format and platforms on which we game may change or increase, the general idea has stayed the same: we like to play games and we like to find new ways to do it. We can even trace an 'important and at times under appreciated relationship between exploratory work in computer science and the early history of computer games' (Lowood, 2009: 5). This seems directly related to our tendency to manipulate or modify our technologies to accommodate this proclivity toward the gamic—even the relationship between the intentional use of an object versus its playful use is an important notion to consider when exploring games, especially digital games (which owe so much of their existence to modern technologies). By considering the earlier representations of the ways in which games were played and then the more recent developments of the digital games,

through the parallel developments of the console-based and computer-based game, we can appreciate the ways in which games have developed and the ways in which the digital game owes much of its emergence to not only the specific technological contributions of the 20th or 21st century but also to narrative contributions as well.

And finally this chapter drew out the hereditary relationship from the earliest progenitors of the MMO and its most successful manifestation to date, the game WoW, to other current games and gamic forms in existence across the digital gamesphere. It aimed at highlighting some core elements of the MMO itself and the ways in which players experience and navigate this game, its space and its features, heading finally toward a consideration of the history and emergence of WoW as the most successful MMO to date. One particularly salient element of the MMO and WoW playing environment is the idea that players need not choose only one approach to their gameplay—and this free and expansive form of play has allowed for a specificity in terms of self-driven affiliation with a particular pathway of play within the persistent game environment, hinting at a distinctive element in the MMO gameplay environment and one that allows for specific research into strands of distinction and divergence. Another example of this idea of distinctiveness within the gameplay experience—as recorded and explored by the author herself—is the way that beginnings and ends function within the persistent gaming environment. How can it be that we have such layers of complexity and difference amongst those players that engage, regularly, with what appears to be the same persistent game environment? These ideas—of divergence and complexity, of distinction and familiarity, of beginnings and endings—are presented and experienced in a novel way in the MMO and point to the way that gamic action functions in a game that best defined by its most salient features: it is connected, persistent and multiplayer. The 'complicated' (Galloway, 2006: 36) nature of WoW and the multitude of ways that gamic action is expressed within it can be well explored by looking at raiding as a particular layer of play in the game. In the following chapter, I present the methodological approach, built from the theoretical framework and the particular challenges of researching in an online world, which has guided the scope of the empirical work

presented in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4:

Researching online game worlds

We shape our tools and our tools shape us.—Marshall McLuhan

Introduction

Thus far this thesis has considered both the previous academic work on digital games and its development as a medium. I now turn to the nature of designing and implementing a methodological approach to researching an online digital game. I have drawn on a specific number of theoretical notions and research practices to work through the complexity of researching raiding practices. Bradshaw and Stratford write, '... in opting for a qualitative research design, we are influenced by the theories we are concerned with, by studies undertaken by other researchers in our interpretative communities that we have found interesting, and by the research questions we wish to ask—all of which are interrelated' (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010: 72). Within the scope of this thesis, I have attempted to draw on theoretical approaches to games research and ways of thinking through the dynamics of action in an essentially online space. While the study of digital games is often described as being in its infancy and still under-represented in the literature (Ash and Gallacher, 2011) there are already some

interesting ways that researchers have thought through the dynamics of gamic action and the complex experience of play in a persistent game environment. Finally, my own desire to understand those specific aspects of raiding that both distinguish and define it, particularly as an expression of digital *gameplay* and a manifestation of *the online,* are very much due to my 'interest' in the subject and my pre-existing orientation as a member of the community. My aim, then, in designing a research approach, was to utilize methods that would allow me to best explore gamic action and capture the multisensory nature of raiding gameplay in an online environment while being mindful of my own placement in the community. In addition, like many qualitatively driven approaches, my journey through a series of specific practices among particular online gamers resulted in some 'messy' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 559) moments that were unexpected. This required that I apply a flexible, adaptive approach to my research and also that I integrate novel components to support my work, elements that may not typically be identified with the methods that are typically undertaken in face-to-face qualitative research.

My aim then, in this chapter, is to attend to how I designed and conducted research in the online persistent game environment, particularly when employing a qualitative methodology. This chapter follows the journey of my own research experience, presenting the scope and design of the methods undertaken to complete it, paying particular attention to the 'messy' dynamics experienced while conducting the research. I had to first remain sufficiently reflexive while already positioned in the community that I wanted to research and then navigate the complexity of conducting qualitative methods in an online environment, an essentially 'multiphrenic' environment (as described by Markham and Baym, 2009: x) that does not necessarily parallel the norms and expectations of the conventional offline environment. This chapter considers the work of conducting ethnographies within an online context and also retells my own experiences trying to work through the methods I adopted and adapted to effectively utilize the 'shared, taught, learnt, discussed, modified, criticized and practiced' nature of qualitative methods, particularly considering the complexities and 'multi-modal' nature (Markham, 2011: 119) of the online environment itself, aimed at drawing

out those specificities and affordances that helped me to define the experience of game raiding in a persistent game environment.

Toward a methodology for online research

Research conducted online is no longer viewed as a new phenomenon; it has become established as a valid (and source) of investigative enquiry (Lee *et al*, 2008). The consideration of or engagement with the internet or online environments in some form or other has become so common in the framing and pursuit of current research, that even the engagement with the internet limited to conducting preliminary research or a secondary analysis in the support and development of wider research practices is viewed as customary (Lee *et al*, 2008). But when it comes to considering the internet or online environments as a significant part of or the sole site and source of a research endeavour, more specific internet-related contributions have been made. The work of Christine Hine (2000; 2005; 2009) and Annette Markham (1998; 2009; 2011) are considered seminal contributions to thinking through the methodological and ethical problematics of online (often referred to as 'the internet' as well) research. Additional contributions by Howard Rheingold (1993); Sherry Turkle (1995, 2011); and Lori Kendall (2002) are good examples of in-depth qualitative work on the internet and online environments. Even specific disciplinary contributions to the notions of the 'virtual', 'online' or 'the internet' have been made, where a significant amount of the qualitative or quantitative work has been conducted around the nature and inhabitation of 'online space'[53]. These often take the form of quantitative work, where the research is the result of surveying or data sampling from online sources (a good example of this might be the work of Williams *et al* (2008) where researchers analysed the results of a survey about gamer habits and practices); qualitative work, where a researcher might spend time exploring a specific online community or practice typically relying on

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[53] A good example of a specific contribution to an exploration of 'the internet' or 'online space' within geography would be *Virtual Geographies: bodies, space and relations* (Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May. London: Routledge, 1999). In this work, Crang *et al* consider the implications (in the advent of the wider proliferation of the internet of the 1990s) of these 'new technologies' (1) on geography, particularly when they mention a term that had emerged within geography in response to these new ventures into online space: 'virtual geography'.

ethnographic means[54] (TL Taylor's 2006 *Play Between Worlds,* a study into the culture of online gamers, is a good example of qualitative research into online game environments); or mixed-methods approach where a researchers study the internet or an aspect therein applying both qualitative and quantitative methods. But the work of thinking through a holistic approach to designing online-based research is particularly well drawn out as an example from Hine's seminal work on researching the internet in 2000, which I would like to expand on more here. By the late 1990s, academia had produced a significant amount of work on the internet (often also referred to as the virtual, cyberspace or the Net), and as Crang *et al* (1999) noted in their own seminal geographical contribution to the subject of the 'virtual' in *Virtual Geographies*, 'proliferating debates' over the 'significance of new technologies of computer mediated communication' pervaded, particularly framed in the context of the 'qualitatively different human experience of "dwelling in the world"' (1). But how to conceptualise, study and capture the experiences of a world with what seemed like a new way of dwelling in it? For Hine, for example, her dilemma in conducting her own online ethnography, was how to adapt methodologies and research orientations that had, until the advent of the internet, usually been conducted in a conventionally corporeal and proximity-based way.

Hine's interest in the internet as a 'site for interaction' (2000: 50) seemed a contrast to the traditional picture of the ethnographer as a face-to-face worker, a traveller who physically visits a location for research purposes and draws insight from that bounded association with the physical space. For Hine, adapting the ethnography to suit this new despatialized environment of the internet, while proposing a series of working principles to help guide what she terms a 'virtual ethnography' (2000: 63):

1.   The ethnographer should maintain a sustained presence in the setting.

2.   'Cyberspace should be thought of as a space detached from any connections to "real life" and face to face interaction' (64).

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[54] This linking of ethnographic work with the study of the internet and internet-related phenomena has been recently proposed as a *netnography* (Kozinets, 2006) within the field of consumer research as a proposed distinctive form of ethnography that is suited to internet-related research.

3. Ethnography should be located in a mobile-sited context rather than multi-sited.

4. 'The object of ethnographic enquiry can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle' (64).

5. Due to the blurred 'making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the "virtual" and the "real", Hine suggests that 'stopping the ethnography becomes a pragmatic decision' where the 'ethnographic object itself can be reformulated with each decision to either follow yet another connection or retrace steps to a previous point' (64). Hine adds that the ethnography should be limited by 'the embodied ethnographer's constraints in time, space and ingenuity' (64).

6. 'Virtual ethnography is interstitial' (65), meaning that its function and form often fits into other activities of the ethnographer and subject. Immersion, Hine notes, is only intermittent.

7. 'Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial' (65). Holism is impossible to achieve.

8. Virtual ethnography involves intensive interaction. The ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a 'valuable source of insight' (65). Virtual ethnography draws on 'ethnographer as informant' and embraces the 'reflexive dimension' (65). The use of and engagement with technology is a part of virtual ethnography.

9. Due to the technologies related to accessing and navigating the internet, the ethnographer and informants are capable of being there or not there—the technology enables 'fleeting or sustained' relationships across 'temporal or spatial divides' (65). 'The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies *is* the ethnography. This is the ethnography *in, of* and *through* the virtual.' (65)

10. 'Virtual ethnography is not only virtual in the sense of being disembodied,' it also raises the issue of being 'not quite' (65). The 'adaptation of methodology to circumstance' (66) is central to the principles of virtual ethnography. As Hine stressed, 'Adapting and interrogating ethnography keeps it alive, contextual and relevant.' (66)

I have summarized all of Hine's principles here for a specific reason. Though not designed specifically with research of an online digital game in mind, they offer a number of helpful principles from which to base a consideration of the practice of research in a persistent game environment; the most salient ones I will highlight below. Hine suggests certain guiding principles related to the nature of conducting an ethnography online: it should be sustained, intensively interactive,

multi-sited, technologically positioned, interested in connections and flows, and adaptive in nature. As Hine writes, 'An ethnography of, in, and through the Internet can be conceived of as an adaptive and wholeheartedly partial approach which draws on connection rather than location in defining its object.' (2000: 10) This adaptive and connective approach, where one can trace the *connections and flows* of gamic action and sensibilities has been informative in my own practice of engaging with the online persistent game environment and its complexity as expressed through the action of raiding. My decision to trace the experiences of raiders by studying the ways that their gameplay both connects and flows through multiple platforms and spaces had allowed me to identify the nuances within the raiding environment. This is particularly well reinforced through the work of Fields and Kafai (2010) when they applied this idea of a 'connective ethnography' (drawn from Hine's earlier work, among others) to trace gamer practices across the 'different spaces' of play (91), an approach that greatly affirms my own.

In addition when looking at a methodological approach to studying gamic action and the affective experience of gameplay, I draw from Galloway's suggestion that the 'four moments of gamic action' that have informed the theoretical framework of this thesis to help build a framework for designing the methodology of this thesis. He writes:

> I have outlined a four-part system for understanding action in video games: gaming is a pure process made knowable in the machinic resonance of diegetic machine acts; gaming is a subjective algorithm, a code intervention exerted from both within gameplay and without gameplay in the form of the nondiegetic operator act; gaming is a ritualistic dromenon of players transported to the imaginary place of gameplay, and acted out in the form of diegetic operator acts; and gaming is the play of the structure, a generative agitation between inside and outside effected through the nondiegetic machine act.' (Galloway, 2006: 37)

In Galloway's four-part system, delineating these forms of action allows for not only a kind of systematic categorization of the diverse interplay in gamic action existent in a persistent online game environment, but it also permits a form of coding or organizing of data when tracing those aspects of gaming action that can complicate and permeate the online digital game. Galloway himself notes this when he points to the complex nature of multiplayer games such as *WoW*.

> To be thorough, one should supplement it with a consideration of the relationship between two or more operators in a multiplayer game, for the very concept of diegetic space becomes quite complicated with the addition of multiple players.' (2006: 36)

And finally, to best support this idea of conceptualizing and working through the *complicated* nature of gamic action in the multiplayer game space, as Galloway suggests above, I follow TL Taylor's (2006) example from her work on the MMO *EverQuest,* where she:

> ...came to inhabit the world and game alongside fellow players. Through the course of that time I moved through several guilds, saw sets of people and friends leave the game (and a few came back), and eventually found myself outpaced by a game that grew and changed in some fundamental ways from the one I started in 1999. This work is a product of that engagement, a product of a qualitative approach in which the researcher immerses herself in a culture and lives, talks, and works with and among the community members for a stretch of time. I want to make a strong case for the role of this method, and of ethnography, participant observation, and interviewing, in understanding the richness of spaces like *EverQuest.* (16)

Taylor's experience of engagement in the game 'world' resonates with my own. I have opted to follow her approach to valuing the adoption of ethnographic methods as a helpful way to 'understand the richness' of MMO game spaces as it warrants an adaptive (Hine, 2000) and connective ethnographic (Fields and Kafai, 2009) approach in the research practice.

In determining the ways that research of the 'online' has been conducted, Markham suggests that there are three major pathways: *1)* as a source of information (above and beyond any face-to-face or 'offline' sources) used as part of a study into any type of 'social phenomena' (Markham, 2011: 112); *2)* as a primary exploration of any social phenomena that is fundamental built from or reliant on the online for its existence; and *3)* the study of the internet (and related components) as its own phenomena (Markham, 2011). This interdependence on the online as a source of information (or supplemental data), as a site of enquiry in and of itself, or as an organic producer of its own forms of specific and online-sustained communities or 'phenomena' (112), reinforces this idea of the multiple and varied ways that researchers have engaged (and need to engage) with the

internet and how these phenomena might be studied. In the case of a persistent game environment, or MMO, such as WoW, one core distinguishing feature is its *online-ness.* It is definable and describable as a *game,* much as chess is a game, but its online-ness is what provides a framework for locating its study and, in the case of this thesis, was where I conducted the entirety of my research. So the decision to conduct my research online was due to the nature of my research site and the fact that it exists, predominantly, in a persistent online environment (thus meeting Markham's second descriptor for ways in which a social phenomenon exists by virtue of the internet itself).

Conducting an ethnography online

My research design and methodological approach was influenced by the questions I wanted to ask and the way I wanted to explore game raiding in *World of Warcraft,* as suggested by Winchester and Rofe (2010) when they highlight the impact that research questions can have on methods: 'research questions will to some extent shape the methods that will be used' (9). As an experienced game raider before I began my research, I was aware that raiding is a very action-driven and affect-laden gaming experience and thus wanted to study the action and experience of raiding with these experiences in mind and from the perspectives of the raiders themselves. As a result, my primary goal was to conduct an in-depth ethnography of game raiders and raiding practices in the online persistent game environment and to draw out those practices that distinguish and define raiders. I also wanted to engage with my own situated perspective as a gamer, while ensuring I had built in enough reflexivity in my research. Winchester and Rofe (2010) discuss how they resolved their own dilemma of positionality when conducting research in a community where the researcher was already a member:

> While [Rofe's] background afforded detailed insight into and access to a community notoriously suspicious of 'outsider' scrutiny, it had to be balanced against the potential for bias in the interpretation and reporting of results.... Clearly, issues surrounding the position of the researcher or his or her reflexivity are critical in participant observation. (12)

Being mindful of this positionality would prove to be important to my own research approach (and something I discuss in relation to both my own disclosure to research participants later in this chapter) and in relation to how I captured and explored my own experiences of raiding gameplay in later empirical chapters.

But for my research to work, it had to factor in not only my own positionality in the research site, but also the dynamics of the medium and location of the research. I found the work of Hine (2000) around conducting online ethnographies; Galloway's systematization of moments of gamic action (2006); and Taylor's (2006) research practice ethos toward conducting ethnographic work in a multiplayer environment to all inform my own development of a methodological approach to my own research.

There are dynamics of conducting an ethnography in an environment that is both a *game* and in an *online* space that needed to be factored in to my research design. After all, as Kearns notes, 'every participant observation situation is unique' (2010: 245). As a result, I have engaged with certain theoretically guided perspectives into ways to study the digital game and ways to conduct an ethnography in the online environment. In relation to conducting an ethnography in the online environment, if I follow Hines' suggestion that 'space of flows' (2000: 84) has replaced 'space of places' (84) in the context of the online (or internet), then the 'place' of online space should be regard in relation to its 'connections and flows' (Hines, 2000: 64) of the online environment, rather than the associations with proximal geographical place and locations that might ordinarily be a contributing factor in conducting a participant observation in more conventional types of space. Engaging with Galloway's suggestion of analysing the 'material specificities of the medium' (2006: 38) and 'the phenomenon of action' (71) in gaming is a helpful way to consider not only the action of gameplay but the materialities that accompany it. TL Taylor (2006) outlined the ways by which this type of environment can be ethnographically studied through such methods as participant observation and interviews, also outlining the ways in which she collected and drew data for research purposes:

> ... this work is based on numerous player hours logged in the game (over several characters and several years), membership in guilds and a variety of social networks, reading and participation on player-run bulletin boards, meeting in-game people offline, attending a Fan Faire, and fairly active reading and keeping up-to-date with map sites, databases, comics, as well as formal and informal conversations with players. (2006: 17)

Taylor goes on to describe her research practice as 'bricolage, pulling from a variety of techniques, tools, and methods to understand a mix of practices, representations, structures, rhetorics, and technologies' (17). This is particularly helpful when considering the complexity that is inherent in the persistent game environment and its bleed-over between the diegetic game space and the nondiegetic worlds around it—to consider the idea that Taylor puts forth, that MMO players are 'playing between worlds … back and forth, across the boundaries of the game and the game world, and the "real" or nonliteral game space' (17).

Conducting my research entirely from within and around the online site of enquiry did provide me with continuity and an in-depth, serial engagement with the raiding community and as a verification of Hine's assertion that the ethnographer maintains a sustained presence within the site of research (2000). I was available for informal discussions over various online chat programs. I could participate in raiding activity with my guildmates or record an interview over voice-over IP software. I could invite anonymous engagement through my research blog and informal poll. Overall, I was connected. I made a conscious decision to be accessible and linked to the online environment to try and mitigate the 'highly transient' (Markham, 2011: 123) nature of some online communities, sites and endeavours. This enabled me to be more mindful of the gradual shifts in gameplay practices that took place during my fieldwork period, a period that followed a distinctively non-linear fashion with even the work of planning, collecting data, analysis and writing up overlapping and intertwining with the experiences of gamic action. Continuing to remain linked and engaged through the online environment, even as I progressed toward the conclusion of my doctoral study gave me access to these stories that continue to refine those findings that I delineate in subsequent chapters of this thesis.[55]

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[55] This is not to say that I was able to remain consistently connected to the site of my research. Aside from those obvious moments where I was away from the computer by choice, the most noticeable moments of disconnection, where I wanted to engage with the community but could not, were typically related to issues of access to the online. A memorable moment of this disconnection came when I was following of the raiding race during the summer of 2011. I had been following the race for days, sitting in the online

When I initially devised my plan of research, I committed to the idea that the nature of my research approach would require that I spend the majority of my time in-game and interacting with gamers through online means of communication and focus on the 'flow and connectivity' (Hine, 2000: 64) of gamic action (Galloway, 2006) and the experiences of play. The bulk of gameplay action is enacted within the game space and there are a whole series of embodied actions and experiences that surround the game space itself, most particularly the experiences that bleed-over from the game space to the real world (Taylor, 2006; Fields and Kafai, 2010) and the ways in which we locate the experience and enactment of gameplay within the everyday spaces of home and community, evoking Hine's suggestion that virtual ethnography is a mobile activity not just 'multi-sited' (2000: 64). I was able to secure, through participant engagement and by accessing gamer forums, visual examples of gamespace and later able to secure, through requests using online means, photographic examples of the deskspace (Chapter 6 includes examples of these two visual methods), thus rendering unnecessary the need for face-to-face visits with gamers in their homes where I might observe gamers engaged in gameplay.[56] A localized (from a physically

chat rooms and on Skype to hear updates from raiders involved in the race and to check the raiding progress web sites. The guilds were stuck on the last boss (Ragnaros) and I had been receiving anecdotal reports that it would take at least another week before any guild would be successful. During this period I had to travel to London and while I thought I might be out of touch for a day or two, I did not expect to miss the exact moment where the successful guild won the race (particularly since the race had been going on for weeks at this point). But I did. While in a B&B near Gatwick airport and only having access to sketchy internet at best, Paragon killed Ragnaros. I missed a significant moment in the raiding race. I was not there on the virtual sidelines to observe. I was able, after the race, to speak about the experience with the race with individuals, but I had missed that moment of gamic action that was so integral to the experience of competition in raiding. (See Chapter 7 for more information about this raiding race.)

[56] I should note here that from a reflexive perspective, particularly when considering the ways in which future research could carry on the work of this thesis, there is still great validity to the experience of making home visits to observe, document, and trace the arrangement of the playspace, particularly within the everyday objects of the home. In fact, in one informal poll (of 57 respondents) that I conducted (as a way to gauge interest and encourage participation in my research blog [see pages 146–149 for more about my research blog]) about where gamers play while raiding, the majority (49%, *n.* 28) played in their bedrooms, but they also play in their living rooms, communal spaces (shared offices or rooms), and separate rooms (http://www.raidingresearch.co.uk/?page_id=840&poll_page=6). Last accessed November

proximal geographic perspective) study of the action of raiding would provide an artificial sense of gamic action in raiding because it is less common that they engage in the activity with other players who share their local geographical region.[57] As a result, drawing together gamers to discuss raiding in a face-to-face dialogue felt more staged and less of a valid way to study this environment, particularly considering my interest in the ways in which groups intentionally form to raid (Chapter 5) and the experience of gameplay action (Chapter 6).

Research methods in the online environment: face-to-face in a faceless world

A long established method of qualitative social enquiry, ethnography is often a preferred methodology by researchers wanting to conduct an in-depth study into communities and groups. Knowing early on that I wanted to engage with raiders to capture their own experiences and perceptions about raiding game play in order to answer the questions of what types of values and specificities distinguish these players into 'raiders' as a separate type of gamer, the ethnographic approach appeared most suited to my purpose. The challenge, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, was navigating this qualitative approach that has historically seen one of its strengths lie in its 'face-to-face' nature—the idea that the researcher can benefit from that embodied proximity to and engagement within the community—through an essentially faceless environment[58]. Knowing that I might

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24, 2012. While this data was not captured to provide any reliable findings, it does suggest that there might be variation in the spaces of play and could validate the benefit of observing how these spaces of play interact with the everyday spaces of the home.

[57] There are cases of families, friends or coworkers that do play and raid together. In fact, one guild I worked with (Paragon) had three sets of brothers and two co-habitating couples. Chapter 6 shows an image of a shared deskspace. Studying raiding practices among raiders who may share a geographic locality could provide an interesting insight into complex variations and specificities in the enactment of gameplay, if the conventionalities of shared geography have any impact on the established forms of online geography and utilizations of gamespace through the enactment of raiding gameplay.

[58] I'd like to clarify here that while the online environment does not provide for in-person face-to-face interaction, my creative adoption of the term 'faceless' does not mean that I believe there is no 'face' to the online environment. What I mean by faceless here is the lack of in-person, face-to-face contact. The online environment is often rich with forms and varieties of 'faces'—old, new, fictionalised, projected, idealised, generated, mutated, multifaceted—that dot the online landscape. What the online environment does lack,

never be within physical proximity of the participants in my research required that I rethink what proximity meant in the 'faceless' environment. Could I experience similar levels of immersion and engagement with individuals through virtual spaces and across far-flung distances as a colleague might who is spending months in the same location face-to-face with the same group of people? Should I supplement the online space with other methods that could help create that feeling of proximity and intimacy in a faceless environment? Would the lack of physical proximity and face-to-face combined with the widespread impression of the online space being 'anonymous' (Markham, 2011: 116) render what participants told me superficial in scope? And what of the ability—later—to appropriately analyse any nuances in the dynamics of the conversation that might be audible in a voice interview but might be eventually lost in the visual stream of words that comprise a text interview? Could the same methods work? What follows is an exploration of the key research practices I followed for the duration of my doctoral research and some of the challenges (and the answers to their questions) that they presented.

Participant observation in the game space

Participant observation is a means by which one can understand the everyday lived experiences of people (Crang and Cook, 2007), as Kearns notes 'to develop understanding through being part of the spontaneity of everyday interactions' (2010: 245) in the chosen area of study. In the case of my research, my decision to undertake participant observation was to support my desire for a deep engagement with the everyday practices of gamic action by raiders in *WoW*. Kearns suggests that through participant observation geographers can 'strategically place' themselves in 'situations in which systematic understandings of place are likely to arise' (Kearns, 2010: 246). When designing a research approach that looked at both the nature of raiding play in the digital game but also placed it within the context of a persistent game environment, certain factors needed to be considered in relation to participant observation: namely, the action

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however, is the literal in-person exchange, an exchange that is often quite central to an ethnographer's work in the conventional environment.

and experience of raiding and its large group formation, and its presence in an online persistent game environment.

As an ethnographic study, I chose to integrate participant observation early into my research. This took the form of active participation in the raiding activity of a guild. My fieldwork started with a single group because that not only seemed to be a style followed by other ethnographers of MMO play (*see* Chen, 2010) but also because at the outset I believed an in-depth focus would be a helpful way to draw out those aspects of raiding that could help frame its practice. But over time and during those early months of fieldwork practice, I did I find that I needed to expand my ethnographic approach to see if these concepts and experiences were validated among other raiders. I did find that while some concerns were quite universal, their specificities did vary between guilds and even among raiders, which led me to determine—by starting small and expanding outwards to a larger sample—that raiding is composed of a number of generalities that are expressed in a localized and specific manner between individuals and among groups.

Using participant observation also affirms the stand of games theorists who state that studying games requires the playing of games (Aarseth, 2001; Galloway, 2006). This idea of participant observation is well represented in the qualitative work of other games researchers, such as Mark Chen's ethnographic study into expertise among raiders in *WoW* where he utilized participant observation techniques (2010) and Taylor's ethnographic study of *EverQuest* (2006). On a very pragmatic level, fully understanding and documenting the complexity of the action of raiding (as it unfolds) is quite impossible to do without actually raiding with the group. This is due to the mechanics of how raiding is set up. There is no observer or voyeur mechanic in the game to allow an extra group member (above the set 10 or 25 group size) to watch the raid from a third person perspective or to tag along with the group[59]. Thus for me in order to better capture and document

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[59] Since conducting my research in 2009–2012, the technologies around broadcasting game content (called livestreaming) have developed sufficiently to permit an observer to follow a raiding group's activity without needing to be in the group. This still requires that one

the aspects of raiding, I had to be part of the group. I had to be an actual active and participating member. Because a great deal of the raiding content can be difficult to master (particularly during progress raiding, when groups are learning and failing on new raiding challenges), the group often requires that all members are capable of participating. A researcher who is unskilled at raiding, only wanting to observe without actually doing the raiding, could be unwelcome to the group in preference of a member who could contribute skill and ability to accomplishing the task at hand.

The downside for me as an active raider is the challenge of reflexivity. While performing the task at hand (in my case attacking the raid boss with spells from a safe distance), I am literally embodying the action of raiding: *from my head,* with my headphones broadcasting the voice-over IP channel for the raiding group and my eyes focused on the gamespace; *to my hands*, with my left hand on my mouse moving my character around the gamespace in response to changes in the environment or the raid fight, my right hand navigating the keyboard, selecting commands, and typing into the user interface; *to my body,* sitting upright in the chair, with my left leg often found unconsciously shaking in response to and anticipation of a difficult or adrenaline-driven fight against the raid boss. Knowing when and how to note or react to a particularly insightful or compelling event or series of events would sometimes escape me in the heat of the moment. While I relied heavily on software to capture in-game actions and chat, and audio recording software to capture the voice-over-IP (VOIP) chatter, I also knew that returning to the media I recorded would not always provide me with the full scope of the experience. But as gaming is a multisensoral experience, I tried to ensure that my own participant observation allowed me to capture the visual, aural, sensual and textual during this observation.

As Kearns observes, 'there is more to observation than simply seeing: it also involves touching, smelling, and hearing the environment and making implicit or

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raider record and broadcast the activity, however, and can exact a high cost in terms of lag, stability and even loss of privacy.

explicit comparisons with previous experience' (in Hay, 2010: 241). By engaging in this manner and by leaving trigger words and short jotted-down observations as reminders of specific events, I was able to draw on the multisensory nature of the game environment. I would capture visual screenshots of the game space and textual and audio recordings provided an essential accompaniment to my embodied participant observation. In addition, as this work unfolded over a 9-month period, certain affinities and realizations came forward about ways to better capture and fill-in this multi-modal gaming environment. Understanding in greater depth, for example, that raiders actively engage in adapting and modifying their gamespace through their gamespace's user interface (UI) (something I explore in great depth in Chapter 6), I began to request that guild members share and explain their UI modifications. This practice of exhibiting UIs was a fairly common one among raiders at this time[60], though few forums or discussion areas would include raiders actually explaining their specific rationale for why they preferred to place certain visual elements at certain parts of their gamespace or how often they might modify their UIs (and what additional software [called add-ons] they might install to enable their particular visual display). So while the visual had always been an important means by which I had opted to engage in a participant observation, enlisting additional participation by members of my research community was a decision I made later into the fieldwork period. Thus, while participant observation was a particularly important way to engage with the active and embodied experiences of raiding, particularly from my own perspective as well, I needed to explore those emerging issues of action, formation and competition that I was identifying from these forms of observation.

Interviews

Miller and Glassner refer to the interview as a 'symbolic interaction' that can provide 'access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social

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[60] To find an example of the prevalence of sharing and posting modified UIs, one need only visit the popular WoW community site and forums, MMO-Champion, where a 'post your UI' thread was started in April 2009 and as of May 2012 has had over 5 thousand UI examples posted and over 1.3 million views of the thread (*see* http://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/643236-Post-Your-UI. Last accessed November 24, 2012.)

worlds' (2011: 133). The interactive relationship that can be drawn from a 'sustained presence' (Hine, 2000: 63) can also support the practice of interviewing. Even more recent work around qualitative research references the 'oral' as a common method of conducting qualitative research, referencing interviews, focus groups, and biography (through oral history) as examples (Winchester and Rofe, 2010). I utilized a non-positivistic and interactionist (Silverman, 2001) approach to interviews, where the goal was to employ unstructured, open-ended and at-times in-depth interviews that would provide depth and the production of meaning for the gaming environment that I wanted to explore; I also aimed to follow an ongoing, interactive approach, by conducting a series of serial interviews with specific guilds aimed at providing a better framework for drawing out the specificities that define game raiding. It also allowed me to meet my goal of highlighting those participant-driven findings that are integral to the empirical work of this thesis. My goal in conducting interviews was to draw out those issues that appeared as significant practices in raiding, such as I had noted from my own participant observation and from the way in which raiding guilds and their members described their interests and goals for raiding. One such example of the benefit of this open-ended and adaptive interview approach was how I was able to draw out the nuances of competition in raiding. When I approached the raiding guild Bridgeburners in early 2011 to explore some specific areas in raiding, a question (included on the questionnaire that I prepared for members of Bridgeburners to respond to) was fine tuned to help draw out how raiders approach and perceive competition:

> 1. What role does competition play in your experience of raiding? Is there any competition between raiders in your own guild or are you more focused on external competition? Do things like server ranking or EU ranking matter to you? Do you think it's important to have a competitive edge or approach as a raider? (From the Bridgeburners raiding practices questionnaire, posted March 2011)

As far as my approach to interviews were concerned, they took varying approaches. For example, I conducted one-to-one interviews over VOIP with several members of the raiding guild Chi as I wrapped up the participant observation component of my fieldwork with them. In the case of Bridgeburners, I approached them formally, first securing permission (from one of the guild's leaders) to approach the guild and then posted a questionnaire (about raiding practices and experiences) on their guild's forum and inviting interested respondents to privately message me on the forum with their responses and

offering to conduct the interview via text or Skype if they preferred.[61] In the case of other guilds, such as Paragon, I researched their guild site and contacted their leadership via email to request a group interview. I also approached some guilds for interviews by posting on their forums or by sending a private message to their guild's leader (which is how I arranged to speak with the guilds Method and Blood Legion). In certain specific situations, such as my contact with the guild Imperium, I met the guild leader (Fenchurch) through both of us 'hanging out' and occasionally chatting in the Paragon IRC chat room[62]. In one or two isolated incidents—my contact with the guild Solidarity is a prime example of this—guilds approached me to offer to participate in my research and I then asked to interview them. This was a result of a developing external awareness of my work that was developing out of some interaction with the raiding community through my research blog (see pp. 146–149) and some media interest in my research[63].

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[61] In the case of Bridgeburners, two members asked for a phone interview, three asked to conduct a text-based interview, and the rest (six in total) completed the questionnaire and returned it to me. In the case of several of these respondents, shorter informal extended discussions took place following the completion of these questionnaires. I did conduct one further in-depth group interview (via an online text-based chat room on IRC) with the guild's officers and guild leader (six raiders in total).

[62] IRC stands for internet relay chat. The Paragon IRC room was an area that I would often spend most days just lurking in mostly so that I could conduct casual conversations or interviews with members of the guild Paragon and others who were in the IRC chat room as well.

[63] Media coverage has included the following: I was interviewed by the BBC about raiding practices in February 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-12326825; I was interviewed for the BBC Radio 5 program Outriders about raiding in February 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/outriders/2011/02/tracked_televised_taught_and_t.shtml; by manaflask.com, a raiding community Web site, about my doctoral research into raiding in April 2011, http://manaflask.com/en/article/848/top-level-raiding-a-q-amp-a-with-ladan-cockshut; I was interviewed by Paragon and asked to be the guest commentator about the December 2011 raiding race for their community site, http://www.paragon.fi/news/research-and-raiding and http://www.paragon.fi/articles/raid-observer-dragon-soul-raiding-progress-your-day-1-update; I was asked to write a guest commentary about the nature of the raiding race in January 2012, http://www.manaflask.com/en/article/1510/what-really-happened-in-dragon-soul-progress-analysis-with-ladan; I was asked to interview Athene and Killars, two well-known gamers about their charity drive to raise $1 million in March 2012, http://www.manaflask.com/en/article/1704/ladan-interviews-athene-and-killars; I hosted a series of audio and video interviews about raiding, including this one about livestreaming in April 2012, http://www.manaflask.com/en/article/1738/ladan-039-s-livestream-about-livestreaming-on-saturday [uploaded as a 6-part interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5jWk8scJyo&feature=plcp&list=PL4AB1E35BE72AF5

As far as the scope and type of interviews conducted, these have taken on a few forms. In a few cases, my interviews were short, one-off interactions with specific raiders about a particular issue, such as competition, gaming practices or raiding group activity, but more often they were in-depth group interviews (usually with at least several members of a guild) or one-on-one interviews. In many cases, these interviews evolved into 'serial interviews' (Crang and Cook, 2007: 74), sometimes at my prompting and sometimes through interest and ongoing contact with initial interview contacts. Either which way, all interviews began in a very formal, structured way and would often evolve to subsequent serial informal conversations, even to the point where members of guilds would invite me to 'hang out' with them in informal contexts. An example of this is my work with the raiding guild Method. I first approached Method in March 2011 in order to conduct a group interview with them, aimed at exploring specific questions about their perceptions of competition and performance in raiding. I contacted Sco, the guild leader, via a personal message on their guild's site and he agreed to set up a group interview over the guild's VOIP and gave me permission to record the interview for my later transcription. The interview included 12 members during that first group discussion and took almost 3 hours to complete. Following the interview, I approached (and was approached by) a number of individuals who participated in the group interview to provide more insight into specific ideas raised during the interview such as perspectives into why groups form. One aspect of the interview with Method (and other top-tier guilds) was my informal 'interview notes' that I would post on the research blog; this was often of great interest to the top tier guilds (who would sometimes ask what they could get out of doing an interview with me and saw my posting of general interview notes [with their consent] as a positive piece of media attention).

So over time, a friendly rapport developed and we remained in intermittent cordial contact as I continued my work. I took advantage of this contact a couple

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70]; and in July 2012 I was interviewed for a BBC article about a new practice WoW publisher Blizzard's setting up a game system in Diablo III for auctioning game items for real cash, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-18783069. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

months later when I asked Method to capture, using audio recording software, their progression efforts during one of the intensely competitive race between top guilds at the release of new game content in the summer of 2011. This emerged as I began to observe a significance in the role that competition plays in the action of raiding. We agreed that this audio content would not be sent to me until after the race was finished (to ensure that I would not share any strategic information that might be on these recordings during the race) and I followed up with another group interview to discuss the experiences of failure in the midst of intense competition (the content of this experience is shared in Chapter 7). This time about 8 or 9 members participated and the members were more engaged. This long term (over the course of a 6-month period) interaction resulted in the guild itself being engaged in contributing specifically collected and planned data to the research. They also saw a benefit to my work as providing them with a degree of media attention. This kind of community engagement in my research was a significant benefit that emerged from this utilization of the serial interview approach.

My interviewing approach was often open-ended and unstructured and I took advantage of multiple means of internet-based communication to complete the interviews. The two examples shared above about Bridgeburners and Method demonstrate the variation even between guilds and the fact that I had to employ an adaptive approach to interviewing to suit the guild I hoped to speak with. In the case of Bridgeburners, the majority of contributing participants preferred to use a text-based form of interaction, while Method was far more comfortable using voice-based methods. Naturally this resulted in a series of organizational challenges as far as how to document, catalogue and organise content that included audio, visual and textual content. An extreme example of adaptability in terms of internet communication was my interaction with the Chinese raiding guild Stars. All of my contact was via email and through one player, LeonKing, their designated 'foreign affairs' representative and translator[64]. But even in the

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[64] During an early interaction with LeonKing in 2010 (who first contacted me via the Paragon forums, offering to connect me with Stars so I could interview them and include their perspective into my research), I learned that he had just completed a PhD in the United States and had just returned to China. This probably explains his comfort with

case of this seemingly most removed and distant of interactions (perhaps the most faceless of them all?), I developed a rapport with LeonKing and Stars, sustaining intermittent email contact with them over the course of a two year period[65]. While certain types of interview styles may work better for the researcher or the interview participant, the important factor should always be endeavouring to break through those 'faceless' barriers to establish that rapport and sense of connection despite the lack of face-to-face, in-person interaction. This experience of interviewing practices reflects Hine's assertion that online ethnography be 'an adaptive and wholeheartedly partial approach which draws on connection rather than location in defining its object.' (Hine, 2000: 10)

I should note that while video conferencing and interviewing is an accessible technology for research in the online environment (which could provide a greater link to that face-to-face interaction that may be lacking in the online environment), due to the multimodal nature of gaming in an online persistent game environment, most raiders (unless those video broadcasting their gaming) rarely use video technologies (with some not even owning webcams). This is one of those particularly interesting examples of specificity within the raiding community. Due to the orientation of the raider toward the action and engagement with the game space, and the spaces of play around it, there is little time or opportunity for viewing fellow raiders on a video screen. Voices are often readily heard through voice-over IP software, but the faces are less often seen. From my point of view as a researcher, while I could have offered to conduct interviews using video technologies, this was not always a practical (as doing group video conferencing is costly) or preferred choice.

Another important lesson learned was in relation to the evolution of interviewing practices into a series of serial interviews, particularly when the interviewing processes reached such a level of informality that I would, at-times, forget to

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being the 'Western contact' for a group that generally does not have a lot of contact with WoW players outside of China.

[65] My most recent email (to congratulate Stars on a recent raiding race win) was in May 2012.

engage in my researcher self, still continuing the rapport as my gamer self. Fortunately a great deal of online chat software allows for a buffered capture of chat (if you have not set it up to always keep chat records) so some could be recovered, even after the fact. That awareness of my role as a researcher would sometimes be blurred due to the extended duration of my contact with raiders and the fact that I was an already established member of the community. I also felt aware of my transition from raider to researcher, and the blurry overlap in-between.

Multisensory capture

As stated earlier, some aspects of my research required either adapting pre-existing methods or developing novel methods to meet my needs. In the case of a persistent game environment such as WoW, the multimodal and multisensory are distinctive elements. As such, capturing video of game activity, screen shots, and audio recordings were critical to my ability to map out the complexity of actions that delineate the game space. I would say that in the case of the multisensory, this became my most experimental approach and the place where I seemed at times to 'make up the methods' (McGuigan, 1997: 2) as I went along, reminiscent of Taylor's experience of adopting a 'bricolage' (2006: 17) approach to her research methods. In some cases, this orientation toward engagement with the multisensory in raiding seemed to produce some results: I captured visual images; I asked raiders to photograph (or screenshot) their deskspace and gamespace; I recorded raiding play and reviewed films made by other raiders. All of these approaches provided some means to draw out the complex and specific in the actions of and values of raiders. In other cases, certain approaches yielded more mixed results such as trying to trace the movement of play with a raider as we reviewed video footage together. This last approach, done with two members of Paragon on two different occasions, did provide some interesting nuances in play and movement, particularly from a learned experience of play perspective, but it became difficult for me to enunciate exactly what I wanted the raider to do (mostly because I was not certain what might come out of the exercise!) or think about as we were looking at the raid footage and so much of the discussion seemed to revolve around how to think about the space as opposed to those

specificities in movement and spatial awareness that seem so central to the experience of raiding gameplay. It is an opportunity for future research to continue to work through this connective ethnographic approach (Fields and Kafai, 2009) of using multisensory methods to trace the raider through the specificity of her entire space of play.

A significant benefit that emerged from engaging with the multisensory (particularly the visual and aural) in the research was the finessing of particular actions in relation to raiding. In the case of the visual, for example, the simple ability to trace the nuanced variations in deskspace arrangement (as discussed in Chapter 6) through the use of photographic methods allowed me to work through a sense of the spatial relationships around the play space of the raider. In addition, being able to capture and analyse the vocal expressions of raiders engaged in the jubilation of success (such as recording 1-1 in the Introduction) and the despair of failure (as expressed in the transcribed recordings in Chapter 7) provides a framework for understanding the emotive experience of play.

Data management and analysis

Crang and Cook (2007) refer to data analysis as a 'creative, active, making process' (132). They also refer to the inseparability of 'writing and analysis' (133) in the process of dealing with the data collected during the work with raiders. At first, Crang and Cook describe the researcher's experience with collecting and managing a 'mass' of data, which then presents the challenge of how one turns 'it into a cogent, hopefully illuminating and maybe even impressive "analysis"' (132). I held to this hope as I began to work through my own collected data, which was presented as a kind of *mass,* or growth, made up of a complex collection of linkages, data types, and media. My own data included interviews that had been conducted via text or audio; video footage; in-game chat and gamic action logs; and screen captures (also called screenshots) of different forms of gamic space. In table 4.1 below I outline the type of data that I collected over the course of my fieldwork. (Refer to the Appendix, pages 328–340, for more specific detail on research participants cited in the thesis.)

Types of data collected	Form of data	Scope of collection
In-game data: game log	Text, log capture	Passive collection of in-game activity, chat, and actions between August 2009 and May 2010.
In-game screenshots	Visual screenshots	Solicited and captured screen shots from raiders or of groups
Raiding fraps footage	Video capture Video download	Solicited raiding fraps footage from raiders and raiding guilds; reviewed and downloaded video footage from video upload sites (YouTube).
In-game observation	Visual methods; fraps viewing	Observed raiding guilds while raiding via remote fraps footage; observed raiding during participant observation.
Participant observation	Participatory raiding and gaming methods	Observations drawn from participating in raiding and other WoW gaming activity; mostly self-documented observations
Deskspace photographs	Photo capture	Solicited deskspace examples from raiders
Web site content	Web site forums, postings, articles, and news pieces	Collected text and data periodically from numerous Web sites (see Bibliography) for visual and textual analysis purposes.
Raiding VOIP recordings	Audio recording capture	Captured VOIP recordings during participant observation work; solicited VOIP recordings for specific guild work.
Interviews: informal or ad-hoc	Skype; IRC; MSN Messenger; VOIP	Intermittent voice and text interviews and discussions.
Interviews: one-to-one	Skype; VOIP; IRC	Scheduled interviews with individual raiders.
Interviews: questionnaires	Forum post and email	Solicited completion of questionnaires about raiding practices.
Interviews: group	Text and VOIP	Schedule group interviews with raiding guilds or small group members.

Table 4.1. Types of data collected during fieldwork.

The process of configuring data to draw out the distinctive scope of gamic action among raiders was the primary goal of my qualitative data analysis approach. Using a 'grounded theory' approach, I utilized a coding technique to highlight and draw out those recurring themes around raiding. Analysing the in-game chat logs (Consalvo and Dutton, 2006) and transcribed or text interviews were central to

my analytical approach, along with content analysis to study the nuances of text or verbalisations within the data. I also adapted an autoethnographic approach to my own documented gamic experiences. By drawing out themes and coding data during my earlier participant observation phase, I was better able to hone in my interview questions to focus on the specific issues of formation, action and competition. An example of how I honed my data collection was in relation to my study of the raider user interface as part of the action of raiding. Early into my participant observation I noticed a significant amount of discussion among raiders about their UI modification to facilitate improved raiding. I then asked raiders to submit their UIs onto my blog forum and to explain their reasons for modification. They would describe their UI in terms like 'cute', 'informative-efficient', 'feel good', 'info', or 'decluttering'. During later interviews, I asked raiders to give further detail on the motivations for modification:

- Why did you set your UI up this way?
- Has changing your UI helped you improve your performance? If so, how?
- How often do you change your UI?

One important lesson I learned during fieldwork was the value of restraint in data collection practices. Due to the ease of collecting passive data in online settings, it is easy for this collection to get out of control, particularly when using software programs for this purpose. In the case of my own in-game data collecting practices, I used in in-game software add-on called Elephant, which allowed the capture of game data. This included chat screens, whispers (essentially a private message between two players), guild chat and also any other messaged actions that might appear on the gamespace (messages about completing a quest, combat messages, atmospheric messaging and so on). My initial intent was to capture as much as possible in the event that I might overlook something. This turned out to be unwieldy with a single day being (with one example being game data captured on July 23, 2009) over 40,000 words and 114 pages (single spaced in Word) long. I then worked on refining my data collection techniques in order to hone in on specific activities (such as limiting the scope of the chat logs or specific actions captured during a raid) and reduce the quantity of data collected. By sampling key data and using coding to strip away extraneous content, I was able to draw out and manage the data more effectively. An example of how I did this was in relation to how I would search through the Elephant data log. Knowing that activity had taken place on a specific date, I would use a search macro to extract

data. I then used a stripping approach to remove any extraneous data so that I could code or identify relevant data. An example of unstripped and stripped data is included in figure 4.1 below where I drew out examples of ways that raiders use the term 'farming'.

```
Unstripped data example
8/23 16:16:58.974  %s has earned the achievement Somebody Likes Me!
8/23 16:16:59.419  Hinaika has come online.
8/23 16:17:09.972  Quest accepted: Polishing the Helm
8/23 16:17:39.532  Quest accepted: Hot and Cold
8/23 16:17:51.788  You receive item: Hodir's Horn.
8/23 16:17:52.056  Quest accepted: Blowing Hodir's Horn
8/23 16:18:35.434  Yinai has gone offline.
8/23 16:18:42.077    |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Loholt: Need 2 more dps⁶⁶ for
normal ToC farming
8/23 16:18:58.066  |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mushy: farming shards?
8/23 16:19:09.360  |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Loholt: Farming dps gear for me,
but shards sure
8/23 16:19:15.338  Variana has come online.
8/23 16:19:19.519  |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mikazuki: HAHAHAHAAHA
8/23 16:19:27.414   |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mikazuki: there was a horde in
fortress WG
8/23 16:19:31.027    |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mikazuki: standing on top of a
tower
8/23 16:19:40.718    |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mikazuki: blasted it off witgh
thunderstorm
8/23 16:19:44.980  |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mikazuki: he fell down and died
8/23 16:19:51.795  Quailette has come online.
8/23 16:20:13.535  You receive loot: Frigid Mail Gloves.
8/23 16:20:13.535  You receive loot: Hoary Crystals.
8/23 16:20:34.625  You receive loot: Hoary Crystals.
8/23 16:20:34.625  You receive loot: Crystallized Earthx2.
8/23 16:20:34.625  You receive loot: Essence of Ice.
8/23 16:21:22.318  You receive loot: Hoary Crystals.
8/23 16:21:39.673  You receive loot: Efflorescing Shards.
8/23 16:21:39.673  You receive loot: Relic of Ulduar.
8/23 16:21:57.218  Your skill in Staves has increased to 361.
8/23 16:22:00.865  Your skill in Staves has increased to 362.
```

```
Stripped data example
8/23 16:18:42.077    |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Loholt: Need 2 more dps for
normal ToC farming
8/23 16:18:58.066  |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Mushy: farming shards?
8/23 16:19:09.360  |Hchannel:Guild|h[Guild]|h Loholt: Farming dps gear for me,
but shards sure
```

Figure 4.1. Examples of unstripped and stripped data. Elephant log, August 23, 2009.

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[66] DPS stands for 'damage per second'. This is a term that refers to the amount of damage done on enemies per second in game; the acronym is also often used to refer to game characters that are considered *damage dealers.*

Access to the community and considering issues of disclosure

As an already established member of my chosen community of research, I did not see gaining access to raiders as a significant challenge, at least at the outset when I had decided to concentrate my earliest fieldwork with the group (guild) that I was already playing (raiding) with, a European guild named Chi. Amanda Coffey, in her work about the complexities of the relationship between the self and the ethnographer, describes the way that fieldwork places the ethnographer at 'the heart of the enterprise' (1999: 23); in my case, I felt I was already there. As an established player and raider, I was already a part of the 'field' that I wanted to study and decided to take advantage of that positioning. As I planned my fieldwork, I had a short, informal discussion with the leaders of the guild I belonged to to gauge their comfort with the guild being part of my fieldwork plans. All were supportive, most already aware that I had begun PhD research into raiding.

To prepare for my formal 'launch' of the fieldwork, I began to mention my plan to document raiding through my raids with the group as part of my fieldwork, mostly to get an idea of how my fellow players felt about getting involved. Informal discussions were either held in-game or by using online chat software such as Skype or MSN. Once in a while, jokes and comments would be made by my fellow raiders about becoming 'labrats' or 'test subjects'. This kind of joking around was typical of the atmosphere of *anticipation* and *perception* that seemed to couple my open disclosure of my fieldwork plans. These expressions of humour by raiders about the research endeavour was an important reminder of the ways that research participants can 'interpret the researchers' presence' (Crang and Cook, 2007: 40) and the possible anxious anticipation of the 'researcher's gaze' (45), the awareness of *being researched* that I may have given off by opting to be as transparent in my approach as possible. In a way, when I look back on this earliest foray into my fieldwork, I realise that I made a decision to acquiesce to my pre-existing positionality and 'immersion' (Crang and Cook, 2007: 37) in the community where I wanted to conduct the ethnography. My own inability to perfectly separate the *raider* that I already was from the *researcher*

that I aimed to become resulted in a decision to engage in that 'intersubjective' (8) space of research and accept the interplay between the 'outside' and 'inside' of the fieldwork that a researcher inevitably inhabits (Crang and Cook, 2007). By both accepting my own pre-existing immersion in the community and seeking an approach to researching it, my intent was to allow for a transparent dialog between my gamer self and my academic self, and to allow these two overlapping states of being to interact through my research. Perhaps above all this was my own way of locating myself unquestionably 'as a positioned and contexted individual' in my ethnographic endeavour as 'part of the complexities and relations of the field' (Coffey, 1999: 22).

And so the informal disclosure of my plan to begin my fieldwork with the group that I was already raiding with was made formal when I posted an in-depth introduction in July 2009. My goal, I explained in my post on the guild's Web site forum, was to log and record our actual raids with the intention of documenting our gaming practices and drawing out those specificities that distinguish raiding. This would be a passive activity, I wrote, meaning that the software used to record voice-over IP chat or in-game activities and chat would be recording activity in the background and was not intended to disrupt or impair the actual raiding activity itself. I also offered all participants the opportunity for anonymity should they desire it (which none requested). I then explained my plan to go back and analyse and track any particular trends or practices in raiding that warranted a deeper exploration. My engagement in the activity of raiding, I added, would allow me to capture its complexity as it happened, not as strictly an impassive observer (the 'heroic fieldworker' [Crang and Cook, 2007: 8]) but as a co-creator of the activity I wanted to study. I was learning and doing, an endeavour at reflexivity in action. While the subsequent engagement in fieldwork would see me expanding beyond the preliminary participant observation work into interviewing and multisensory techniques, this first foray into accessing the research site provided me with an important opportunity to examine and reflect on the actions

of raiding and, thus, identify those trends and patterns that I could draw from as I continued my work.[67]

I opted to remain as transparent as possible as my research work continued. A few conscious decisions helped me reinforce this intent, which I would like to highlight here. Firstly, I opted to use, as much as possible and feasible, my actual name (Ladan) in any and all communication with research participants throughout my research.[68] Despite the fact that through online chat software and in-game naming conventions I could have chosen any pseudonym to suit my work, I opted to be myself because I wanted to consciously establish my 'researcher self' (Coffey, 1999: 8) within the site of my research. I also felt that by ensuring that my university affiliation, my actual name (which is quite distinctive among players, considering its non-English language origins) and 'real' identity were clear, it would lend an aura of legitimacy to my interactions and, I hoped, engender a degree of trust among research participants. Examples of this included my using my real name as my Skype name, IRC name, and signing my name and university affiliation on all forum posts and using my university contact

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[67] A few words should be said here about the experience I underwent transitioning from being a participant in the community I was researching to also become a researcher of it. If anything my experience speaks to the idea of the growing competency one gains through the experience of conducting fieldwork. This transition was not a straightforward one, nor was there a specific moment where I realised, consciously, that I had become as much researcher as I was participant. But if there was a point where I gained that better ability to draw out themes as they were happening within raiding (and not just as they were happening to me), it was during that period when I expanded my contact from my participant observation period to interact with more guilds and raiders. It also gave me the benefit of being able to better observe while I was already fluent enough in the community I was studying to ask the right questions.

[68] The only real exception to this practice was the use of my in-game characters, Monava (a level 85 shadow priest) and Siyma (a level 85 warlock). This was because both of these characters long pre-date the fieldwork period of my doctoral research and changing my name would have altered the rapport and familiarity that I had already established in the raiding guild and community to which I belonged. (As an interesting side note, when I created my warlock in 2007, I named her Ladan [a spur-of-the-moment decision meant more as a joke than anything else] but I decided to change the name to Siyma about a year before beginning my fieldwork when I became concerned about perception after another gamer mocked the name saying it was a misspelling of 'bin Laden' and asking if I was a terrorist. The interesting irony here is that I have had no further comments about my name [which is a Persian name] looking like bin Laden's throughout the duration of my fieldwork and if anything my surname [Cockshut] has engendered more jokes and comments.)

information for all emails relating to my research. Secondly I decided, early on, that designing and maintaining a blog of my research aims and intents (something I will discuss in the following section) would be an important way of establishing my online identity and, again, hopefully lend an air of legitimacy to my work. Many online researchers speak about the problematics of anonymity as something that can both 'complicate and ease ethical considerations' (Markham, 2011: 117) and from the 'researcher self' perspective, my decision to remove anonymity on the part of my own activities was an attempt to ensure my research approach was as evident as possible to those who might already know me through prior shared-gaming activities but who might now be approached to contribute or participate in the research that I was conducting. Toward the end of my fieldwork a number of guilds that I had not had time to approach (the US guild vodka is a good example of this) queried why I had not asked to interview them.[69] And anecdotally perhaps the most amusing moment in my experience as a 'positioned and contexted' researcher was when I was referred to by celebrity gamer Athene as 'that researcher chick who's getting a PhD about WoW' (Starym, 2012a).

While it remains up to each individual researcher to determine the scope, appropriateness and nature of transparency and positioning within their research site, I found open disclosure worked well in my case. In order to pursue a qualitative, ethnographic model of research in an online environment, I found the only way to make the most of this method of enquiry was to be as engaged and open as possible, which is why I opted to connect to my community of research by locating myself (and my presence) as firmly within the research community as possible by launching a 'research blog'.

Connecting with the research community: designing a research blog

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[69] This is based on a private discussion I had with Killars, officer and raider in the US raiding guild vodka, via IRC, on December 6, 2011.

In some ways the following discussion about how I incorporated a practice in my research engagement is both specific to the online and may represent an example of adaptation (or creation) of a qualitative research approach to the online environment. As such, this account is recounted as a means to think through the complexity of adapting (Hines, 2000) the online research approach to suit the needs of the research participants and the research aims. Early in my research planning I realised I needed a way—without the benefit of that face-to-face interaction—to legitimize my work and to allow my research participants to, for lack of a better term, check me out. This needed to be something they had ready access to and that they could review or observe within the safe confines of anonymity. Knowing how adept at the multimodal forms of online usage and interaction that my intended research community was, a Web site seemed to be my best option.

Certainly I was not the first (nor will I be the last) to conceive of the value of having an 'online presence' as an academic researcher. There are a multitude of academic sites that are either housed on university departmental sites or produced by online-savvy, often new media technology-oriented academics, ready to share their publications, post reflections on their disciplines and maintain an ongoing blog. My intention, however, was to design my blog to be central to my fieldwork strategy. It was not produced with an academic audience in mind but rather a raiding audience. First I decided to include a series of informal polls on various raiding topics (such as 'How often do you modify your UI?') as a way to give the visitor something 'to do' when they got to my site (and thus keeping them there longer). I then decided to include a forum for raiders to contribute to discussions around raiding research topics; and finally I planned to write periodic blog posts on topics of interest to raiders that were usually grounded in academic literature or observational data. Although I anticipated that the traffic to my site would be very small (perhaps limited to research participants and marketing 'bots'), I wanted to ensure my presence was active, professional, and accessible to the community that I wanted to engage in my research. Its success was uncertain at the outset, but with assistance from a volunteer (and fellow raider) with web design training, I launched the site in late 2009. Even when searching on Google,

typing in 'raiding research' (as the site is www.raidingresearch.co.uk) would bring up my blog as the first result. (See figures 4.2 and 4.3 below for captured shots of my research blog.)

Figure 4.2. Example of my research blog, showing the home page (http://www.raidingresearch.co.uk). Last accessed November 24, 2012.

Figure 4.3. Home page example of the 'About screen' of my research blog (http://www.raidingresearch.co.uk). Last accessed November 24, 2012.

While the research blog was clearly a site where anonymous and passive engagement was easy to carry out, those aspects where I had hoped to engage the community in the discussions around the experiences and spaces of raiding game play, namely the forum and the comments option on the blog, were not very successful. Google analytics told me that visitors were coming to my site (on some days up to 1000 visitors a day), and some were even spending extended periods of time on the site (reading content, I presume, though I can't definitively verify that), but most appeared to prefer to make short visits, view content and remain quiet. Occasionally a small discussion would erupt on the comments around a particular post, but for the most part, my posts would go uncommented. On the whole, the benefits and usefulness of including a research blog as part of the overall research planning strategy for engagement cannot be overstated when it comes to designing qualitative methods to use in the online space. While it was used by visitors as a passive source of information for most and thus not a fieldwork data source, it was an important way for myself, as an online ethnographer, to position herself as a researcher within her community of study.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined how this thesis draws on theoretical and methodological approaches in both digital games and online research to enable studying the nature of gamic action in an online persistent game environment. While I have pointed out that the study of digital games is still relatively new, scholars have already suggested some helpful and interesting ways that the dynamics of gamic action and the interactive experience of play in a persistent game environment can be drawn out. As I noted in my discussion about my research approach, I also had to regard my site of research, the game raiders, as both an expression of digital *gameplay* and as situated in *the online*. My aim, then, in designing a research approach, was to apply methods that would allow me to best explore these raiders' experiences of gamic action and capture the multisensory nature of raiding gameplay while being mindful of the online environment that I was working in. This duality of the research site—the *gamespace* and the *online environment*—required that I apply an research approach that helped me consider

the gamic and the online nature of the research site. As a result this chapter endeavoured to outline the rationale and dynamics of developing and implementing a research plan intended for the online environment. Some aspects worked particularly well (some far better than expected) and some were ill suited to the field of study. Reflecting on these lessons learned can inform the viability of a methodological framework for research in an online game environment such as WoW.

In the case of enacting research practices within the raiding environment, revisiting Hine's ten principles is an effective way to reflect on how to be mindful of the 'connections and flows' (2000: 64) in the online space, with a few modest exceptions. She recommends orienting the practice of online ethnography to flows and connections it exhibits rather than the 'location and boundary' (64) of offline space. In some ways, though, the notions of location and boundary are not out of the question when studying the overlapping forms of space in an online persistent game environment—there is a distinct blurring between the virtual and real. This can often be exemplified by what I term the 'deskspace' (and explore in greater depth in Chapter 6), that physical, encompassing location where online computer-based gameplay is staged—that place where the player situates and arranges him or herself for playing. In this way, the ideas of boundaries and locations can be considered, even if the ethnography is conducted primarily in (and about) an online environment. Another exception is under the second principle that Hine offers, the idea that 'cyberspace should be thought of as a space detached from any connections to "real life" and face to face interaction' (64). Though compelling as an idea, the otherness and removal of the online space from the 'real' one, is not one that resonates with the ways in which the online space has developed and merged through the use of ever emerging technologies. While my own work was not one where a face-to-face interaction took place, the 'real life' that Hine mentions definitely was an embodied experience for the raider and its interplay between the gamespace and the deskspace resonated clearly in the work that I conducted. Perhaps the more appropriate way to think through this is the idea of the connective ethnography that later researchers have proposed as ways to better study not only the online

space of a game, but also the multiple spaces that exist in gamers' lives (Fields and Kafai, 2010).

In other ways, I have found Hine's principles a particularly useful way of thinking and working through the dynamics of studying an online persistent game environment. As the subsequent empirical chapters will show, attempting to capture the complex, multi-faceted, and multiphrenic nature of the online space (Markham, 2011) in a game like WoW and among raiders in the persistent game environment meant that I benefited from maintaining a 'sustained' (64) and intensively interactive presence and from considering the mobility of the online game environment, particularly in relation to the ways in which raiders inhabit those 'interstitial' spaces of gamic action. Even the assertion that holism is impossible to achieve, and partiality the norm, when conducting an online ethnography is a clarifying point of view when considering how complex and rich the persistent game environment is. Finally, above all, the idea that an online-based connective ethnography requires a holistic view of the environment and an 'adaptation of methodology to circumstance' has resonated with the work of this thesis, where I took those research practices familiar to ethnographic work and adapted them, when needed, to fit the purpose (and circumstance) of the thesis' aims and to best trace the gamic experiences of raiders. If ethnography is 'strengthened by the lack of recipes for doing it' (Hine, 2000: 13), then surely it is also improved by the ways in which one experiments with both methods and approaches that can draw out those 'connections and flows' that help delineate raiding practices in the online persistent game environment.

The following chapter moves the thesis into the empirical work where it explores formation of raiders by considering both the structures of group formation that enable raiding and those thresholds of belonging aimed at sustaining a group's formation in a persistent game environment.

Chapter 5:

The 'ins and outs' of formation in raiding

Introduction

Group play is a hallmark of the persistent game environment. The experience of grouping for the purpose of play is not only written into the very design and scope of the game itself, but is a prevalent form of gamic action in the game environment. And these groupings, or arranged forms of play, are established and defined by both the groups and individuals themselves. If anything these types of groupings appear to represent the organizing principle by which group interaction exists in a persistent game environment. Some formations are loosely and temporarily arranged while other groupings represent longer-lasting formal ties and connections intended to sustain their longevity in the persistent game environment. Group play is integral to the mechanics of raiding and how these groups approach formation coordinate their approach to raiding allows for a compelling exploration of the forms and enactments of play in an MMO. Thus a mapping of the forms and types of coordinated action is warranted when considering the practice of raiding.

This chapter expands on the earlier chapters' work on framing the theoretical, methodological and contextual scope of researching raiding by now considering its distinctiveness through the lens of group formation in the raiding community in *World of Warcraft*. My research has observed that the ways in which the groups approach and sustain group formation creates a kind of dynamic relationship between those on the outside—or those individuals or values excluded from formed types of play—and those on the inside—or those who have been brought into a group's formation. The terms and means by which a group dictates what is within their group and what they wish to exclude helps shape and form the group's sociality and culture, in a manner of speaking. The group itself, I will demonstrate, becomes both the organizing structure of this community of raiders but also a new way to think through how groups, or subcultures, function in online spaces of play. These *defined* forms of inclusive and exclusive group formation and their established thresholds that determine the transition from being 'out' of a group to 'in' a group help shape the very nature of the raiding game play environment and will be closely examined in this chapter.

The manner in which both individual raiders and raiding guilds choose to define, delineate and frame both *the mechanisms of group formation* and the *dynamics of member desirability* for groups intent on raiding indicates that individuals and groups focus a great deal of attention on the nature, goals, and means of their game play and have a clear idea of what they consider acceptable (inside) or unacceptable (outside) values or goals. My assertion and finding, however, is that ways in which groups form themselves does differ and does not necessarily follow any specific gamewide set of expectations or predetermined practices. So while the practice of raiding may be a consistent or widespread activity, the ways in which groups choose to form and enact this play may not follow a necessarily predictable path. While the process of group formation does include certain core or identifiable features, even allowing for a kind of categorization of values within the scope of group formation, there are nuanced variations in the ways in which groups function that create a kind of localized specificity as expressed through a guild- or group-specific *formation.* How raiding guilds engage in specific processes of formation will be explored in this chapter. It will trace the ways in

which raiding groups form; how these formations are defined and coordinated to perpetuate their existence and successfully navigate the raiding experience; and how issues such as success, atmosphere and change help frame and define the guild and its raiding experience.

Defining formation in raiding

As was discussed in Chapter 2, the socially interactive atmosphere is an oft-referred to feature in the persistent gaming environment of an MMO (Taylor, 2006; Cornelliussen and Rettberg, 2008; Williams *et al,* 2008; Pearce, 2009; Chen, 2010) along with the associative (Schulzke, 2010) in the forms of 'layers of association' (Taylor, 2006: 41). This idea of the associative evokes not only the overlapping opportunities for 'layers' of association among players might be manifested in a persistent gaming environment but also the manner by which association takes place. Even the idea of the communal, or community, has been considered as a means by which to define, frame and explore the MMO (Pearce, 2009). And broader, capacious terms like 'culture' or 'the world' are often used as framing concepts by which to consider the MMO atmosphere (Cornelliussen and Rettberg, 2008). Any of these varying notions and terms are helpful ways to consider the MMO as they do all appear to exist and operate in different ways and forms within the persistent game environment. In short, it is a socially oriented persistent community that exhibits a form (or forms) of community and a defined framework for gamic action. And these terms and concepts also help describe and define the complex social environment that players both construct through their engagement with the gameplay environment and the other players with whom they interact.

In the case of the raiding community—and I use the term community here to refer to a social group that resides in a particular environment (in this case the game WoW) and shares certain common characteristics and goals (an orientation toward raiding)—its particular orientation toward the utilization of a group structure aimed at raiding activity requires a certain formality in its arrangement

and enactment of specific performance and competitively oriented goals. The means by which these groups arrange, form, maintain, and adapt their raiding activity can be well explored through studying their *formation*.

Formation, as explored in this chapter, is framed through a specific dual definition: the manner by which a group is formed and the specificity of arranging that group's function. The ways in which raiders choose to form the groups they create to raid and the means by which they arrange that raiding is often at the forefront of priorities for raiders. Formation in the raiding environment can be seen as a kind of expressed intentionality through action-based, socially framed goals. It also evokes this notion of the associative that TL Taylor (2006) mentions in her work on social interaction in the MMO gaming environment. My intention by concentrating on formation in raiding is to determine how groups specifically shape and perpetuate their raiding activity.

Guild formation in the MMO

Earlier chapters have provided an overview of how an MMO functions, particularly in relation to its approach to character creation, lore development and game play; and group-oriented play pathway to play in the MMO. And while subsequent chapters look at how groups engage in competition and in how they act during raiding activity, this chapter is particularly interested in that process of formation through those guilds interested in pursuing raiding gameplay. Whether formally organized (through guilds) or not (through makeshift groups), raiding is intentionally designed to be a group-based activity.[70] The grouping

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[70] There are deviations from raiding in relation to it being designed as a group activity. There are some raiders that do engage in solo raiding activity, that is attempting to defeat single-handedly a raid boss designed for a group. These are often complex activities that either require specific class abilities or more time than usual. Solo raiders will typically attempt these boss fights on raid bosses designed for lower levels. For example, a level 85 player might attempt to solo raid a boss designed for level 80 raiders. A recent example of this 'solokill' raiding is, http://www.manaflask.com/en/article/1613/halion-hc-solokill-by-for-the-horde-039-s-sheya, where a raider kills a dragon that had up-until-then been viewed as 'unkillable' by a single player alone. Solo raiding is a rare activity but is often

function prevalent within an MMO implies a proclivity toward social interaction. And interaction within an MMO has been described as a 'fundamental affordance' (Taylor, 2006: 33), a kind of basic building block in the persistent gaming environment. In fact, for many players of an MMO like WoW, these forms of interaction are experienced often and in different ways, as the following excerpts from interviews indicate (with my own underlining added for emphasis); they also hint at the idea of raiders being oriented toward the importance of guild formation.

> I do find myself <u>being more social</u>[71]. (Cixel, Blood Legion guild, VOIP interview, December 2010)
>
> We had people at 14, 15 join Blood Legion and essentially <u>grew up with the guild</u>, which is just kind of crazy, scary. (Lawliepop, Blood Legion guild, VOIP interview, December **2010**)
>
> <u>I wouldn't miss our guild meetings</u> for any reason under my control…. I love to hang out with them. (Kruf, Paragon guild, text interview, January 2011)

Being oriented toward belonging to a guild permeates the comments above and is representative of one of the ways in which the guild functions for WoW raiders. Cixel even credits his increased inclination toward 'being more social' to being in a guild and engaged in the group play of raiding. Lawliepop expresses something suggestive of amazement ('kind of crazy, scary') at the long term involvement of those who 'grew up' playing with the guild. And Kruf values his guild's formation beyond the game. And while these statements indicate the importance of social interaction in the persistent game environment, there are specific confines within which it predominates for a WoW raider: *the guild.* Guilds are a widely used mechanic for grouping across the MMO gaming community, and the formations and parameters of each guild are varied in their arrangement and prone to specificity in their scope and goals. So despite guilds and group play being a part of the gamewide and communitywide design of the game, the nature of these groups is a localized experience: for the most part, for the player who belongs to a

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considered quite a feat of performance by raiders and video footage of successful attempts are often widely circulated in the community. (Karsten, 2012) Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[71] Throughout this chapter (and subsequent chapters) I have underlined portions of text from interviews or data for the purpose of highlighting discussion points.

guild, his or her engagement with play can impact on and be influenced by the ways in which his or her own group engages in gameplay. The influence from other guilds that they have little or no contact with has less of an impact in comparison to their own specific guild. Therefore, while the experience of group play is prevalent in WoW, for the vast majority of raiders who belong to guilds, the orientation and perceptions of this group (or guild) experience are actually limited to a singular and localized continuum of affiliation which provides a specific experience group formation.

The aim of this section is to consider the role that guild formation plays in the raiding environment by looking at the ways in which guilds perceive their own formation. I will also identify the ways in which these articulated formations represent widespread yet specific values and precepts distinctive to raiding[72].

How raiding guilds articulate their formation

In any given guild, issues of sociality, goals and time will factor into how that raiding group is formed and functions and how that guild navigates these issues can have an impact on the types of players that belong to that guild, those who are excluded from the guild and the way in which the guild engages with the game's raiding content. The guild itself functions as a kind of bedrock of the raiding community, with guilds being primarily responsible for much of the formal raiding activity within the game space. For many raiders their primary access to the raiding community comes through their raiding guild's community site and forums. Guilds are social constructs in WoW that allow for a formal association amongst players. Players who wish to engage in regular, ongoing

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[72] I should point out here that while the guild function within WoW does not exist merely to support and enable raiding game play (guilds can be formed by players for any reason at all, including levelling up with others, roleplaying or PVP and may have little to nothing to do with raiding), for the sake of clarity and ease of consideration, all the discussion in this chapter revolves around guilds that have formed primarily for the purpose of organizing raiding activity for their members, thus when I use the term 'guild' I mean 'raiding guild'.

raiding will often form guilds with that goal in mind. Guilds are designed with selectiveness in mind, allowing guild leaders to invite new members and remove unwanted ones. Even members can remove themselves from a guild, if so desired.

A guild that is formed for the primary purpose of raiding will often provide very specific information about what it expects from its members and the type of gaming environment that it values. The following represent different ways that raiding guilds define themselves.

> Premonition's (US-Senjin) atmosphere is rather well-collected and not the abrasive, vulgar type that is unfortunately common in many high end guilds. We will not sugar coat things and pat you on the back if mistakes are made, but we also generally portray ourselves as if we were adults in public.

> Blood Legion (US-Illidan) is a strongly motivated and tight-knit guild... Our best members are passionate about their classes and roles. They are constantly looking for ways to improve, take constructive criticism objectively, and always consider the guild's priorities over their own personal glory. They are prepared to adapt to random situations they may encounter and have no issues with being aware of their surroundings. If you think you have the talent and attitude to belong in a stable progression-focused guild, we would love to see an application from you.

> Method (EU-Xavius) is a very stable guild - a large proportion of the members within the guild have been in Method for years. The same leadership that pushed Method through Molten Core remains in place today. The guild community is close, everyone in the guild knows why they are there and everyone shares the same goal, making Method the leading guild. In over five years of raiding the amount of members that have voluntarily left the guild to go elsewhere can be counted on one hand, once you are in Method you won't want to leave. Method is as stable as it gets.

> Bridgeburners (EU-Emerald Dream) is a high-end raid-guild trying to balance in-game progression with a nice atmosphere and a healthy raiding schedule. After a highly successful time during WotLK, where we cleared all content available and being the first guild on the server to do so, we are now looking for a few more people to join our ranks for our Cataclysm adventures.

Certain words emerge from these samples, suggesting how a raiding guild identifies itself. These descriptions are either be aligned with the social atmosphere or values of the raiding guild—'balance', 'healthy', 'nice atmosphere', 'well-collected', 'stable', 'community', 'tight-knit'—or suggest its attitude or outlook toward raiding goals—'progression', 'same goal', 'improve', 'guild's goals over their own', 'strongly motivated', 'talent and attitude'. These kinds of social values are suggestive of an ideal in the guild's culture. They offer a beneficial atmosphere, one that will draw members together ('nice', 'tight-knit') while making its social ethos well known and durable ('healthy', 'stable', 'well-collected'). Raiders know what to expect within the specific guild to which they may belong. Its goal orientation also seems suggestive of a uniformity of approach to raiding ('same goal') that is performance-minded (talent and attitude', 'progression') and group-oriented ('guild's goals over their own'). These in-depth descriptions allow for these raiding guilds to not only self-identify their group's values, but also clearly delineate their goals and expectations for new members. Perhaps it's worth viewing these promotional statements as forming a kind of blueprint of the desired (and ideal) formation for the guild.

Raiding guilds will also often identify themselves by levels of activity (or time commitment) and an orientation toward specific goals. For example, while the term *raiding* is consistently used to describe the guild, ideas of goals and activity will be used in varying ways to specify its priorities. The following list includes defining descriptions of raiding guilds (as provided by the guilds or individual raiders themselves) that I have identified below. This list was drawn from promotional ads posted by guilds when looking for new members or based on descriptions used during interviews I conducted with raiders when they were asked to describe their *type* of raiding guild. A discussion about the ways in which raiders define the types, forms and enactments of these guilds.

- Elite raiding guild
- Hardcore raiding guild
- Hardcore progression raiding guild

- Hardcore end-game raiding guild

- High-end PvE raiding guild

- High-end progression guild

- Active high-end raiding guild

- Semi-hardcore raiding guild

- Focused raiding guild

- Family style raiding

- Progression focused raiding guild

- Social raiding guild

- Casual raiding guild

- Friendly raiding guild[73]

All of these descriptors offered not only provide an idea of the atmosphere of a guild but also its expectations and goals. Concepts suggestive of the *atmosphere* of the guild, with terms like 'social', 'family style', 'casual', 'focused', and *performance expectation*—'elite', 'hardcore', 'high-level'—used to delineate raiding guilds. These two interacting concepts of social atmosphere and an outcomes- and performance-based orientation often appear definitive in how a raiding guild chooses to define itself and how it achieves its aims in the raiding culture. There also appears a hierarchy of value placed on the ways in which raiding guilds delineate their atmosphere and outcomes orientation. These naming practices are reminiscent of those varied 'pathways of play' that I mentioned in Chapter 3—even more so of the ideas of 'layers of play' that Torchia used to describe a perception of hierarchy in skill or performance goals for the guilds. A raider in a more casual or social raiding guild for example might apologize for his or her perceived lack of skill or dedication. This can be linked directly to the speed at which a raiding guild moves through the raiding content—indicating the importance the raiding culture places on outcomes and successful performance.

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[73] All of these (excepting 'elite', which was drawn primarily from interviews conducted) examples appear on ads posted on wowprogress.com. See the Appendix (pp. 328–340) for a full list of guilds from which these examples were drawn.

Above all, certain recurring concepts appear of significance to raiders: the time, outcomes (or progression) orientation of the guild, and the degree to which socialization matters. The perception, on the part of a raider who self-identifies with a casual raiding guild, is that a hardcore raiding guild is more goal-oriented and thus less socially oriented in scope, yet my research indicates that the members of hardcore raiding guilds are just as oriented toward the importance of the social atmosphere as the casual guild member is. So, rather than the idea of being 'social' being a marker of difference between the types of guilds or types of raiders, other issues such as time, attitude, and the prioritization of raiding progress appears a more significant distinguishing factor between types of raiding guilds and how these priorities are arranged (or formed) than whether or not the guild is socially oriented. The following section will look at the nature of formation from within the guild by exploring what guilds identify as belonging 'in' their formation and what is seen as being 'out' and what thresholds of formation and belonging exist to maintain these ins and outs.

The 'ins and outs' of guild formation

While a raider does not have to belong to a raiding guild in order to participate in the raiding community[74], the guild is a common form of social organization that raiders engage in. The majority of raiders will join with these groups in order to facilitate raiding in a consistent and ongoing manner, as suits the raider's needs or interests in raiding activity. The raiding guild itself will also seek membership of raiders who can successfully contribute to its atmosphere and goals for raiding. This kind of selectiveness—by both the guild and the raiders they attract or recruit—indicates that guilds place a framework or boundary of membership where certain specific limits or parameters can determine the scope of belonging. The following section explores these thresholds of belonging, where guilds define what it deems to be 'outside' of the purview of the raiding guild's aims and interests and that which it identifies as being 'inside' its formation.

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[74] Makeshift raiding, where raiders either form spontaneous or ad hoc groups for a one-time only raid groups or use a game mechanic called 'looking for raid' (LFR) that groups up raiders via an in-game mechanic, is another form of random grouping up for the purposes of raiding.

The expectations of a raiding guild are often communicated when raiding guilds want to promote themselves externally and attract new members. Often made available through a guild's own Web site or via raiding progress tracking sites such as wowprogress, a guild will often leave a descriptive statement which reads like a mission statement and recruitment posting combined. These statements often provide important information about the orientation and culture of that particular group (as we saw earlier in this chapter). A closer analysis of these examples of guild mission and recruitment postings identifies certain specific expectations of belonging—organization principles of formation—arranged in the following categorizations. I have also included examples from guilds that exemplify these categorizations.

- **Guild attitude/culture**—A guild will identify its culture in relation to expectations of maturity, attitude, atmosphere or goals.

  > Good attitude, attendance, performance is what distinguishes you between trialist and raider.—ScrubBusters

  > **Team chemistry** is paramount. .... We take our guild's cohesion seriously, and we believe that it is often the single most important force behind our team's progression. Consequently, we're seeking team oriented players who understand that it's often necessary to put Guild needs before individual wants.—Drow

- **Guild recruitment/membership**—A guild will identify its means to recruit and retain members. It also designs its process for screening and trialling new raiding members.

  > Your first impression will be made with the app[75] itself so be creative, show us what you're made of, and put in as much effort into your app as you would in any raid you would expect to attend. Again, we're always accepting exceptional applicants even if your class is closed.—Midnight Sanctuary

- **Game knowledge/expertise**—A guild will determine what level of knowledge is expected to play their raiding character and how to perform in raiding groups.

  > Requirements are either gear and progression at roughly our own level, excellent knowledge of your class, ideally in all its possible roles and varieties, or a quick mind and a furious spirit with a character that clearly shows he or she can and

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[75] 'App' here means guild membership application.

will do everything to fit in and make themselves useful as quickly as possible despite being behind.—Bridgeburners

− **Availability/time**—Guilds will delineate the time they expect members to commit to their raiding goals, particularly when progression raiding.

When we're in progression mode[76] we raid 5 nights a week, from 20:00 to 23:00. We will not raid Saturday nights, and we will not extend raid hours beyond a reasonable amount (1 hour max) when we're positive of a guild first kill. We expect to cut back on raiding hours when content is on farm status.—Darkstorm

− **Approach to learning and failure**—A guild often projects its expectations of how its members approach for learning and failure.

We're looking to recruit people that are able to adapt to new situations quickly, that will learn from their own and *other players' mistakes* so they're not repeated even after wiping to different things and learning other aspects of the fight.—Immersion

− **Raiding activity structure**—Each raiding guild will determine its own approach to actual raiding activity, including strategy, leadership structure and rewards for participation.

* Be punctual in showing up for raids.
* Communication during a raid encounter is very important. You will be required to be on Ventrilo[77] during raids and should be able to write/speak/understand English to a reasonable level.
* During progress raids you need to be fully awake and focused.
* You must be mature both in age and attitude and able to handle any constructive criticism directed your way.
* Be fully prepared for every raid. That means you are up-to-date on all tactics and strategies concerning the encounters planned for that raid night.
* Be on time and don't AFK needlessly (there are breaks once or twice during a raid).—Infusion

− **Technical expectations**—A guild will have technical expectations of its members in relation to computer specifications, Internet access, peripheral hardware, etc.

You must have a stable internet connection with a stable computer. ... Periods of instability will severely impact your trial period and you may be replaced on progress periods if it occurs then.—Loot FTW

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[76] 'Progression mode' here refers to that period of time when a guild is first learning new raiding fights.
[77] Ventrilo is an example of voice over-IP (VOIP) software. Other examples would be Skype or Team Speak.

These expectations for belonging, typically framed through an expectation of what the raider should bring to the guild and what the guild can offer to the raider. If anything the statement by ScrubBusters guild provides an illustrative example of what I see as these thresholds of belonging in guilds—that meeting the guild's expectations of 'good attitude, attendance, performance' is what they have established as a threshold for the new recruit ('trialist') to cross over to become an accepted member ('raider'). These ideals of belonging and the parameters of exclusion as shown in the preceding examples indicate the ways that guilds localize their scope of formation.

The following sections will consider these various categorizations of belonging that guilds choose to define themselves, paying particular attention to how a raiding guild delineates what it desires to have *within* their guild and what they want to keep *outside,* or what is unwelcome. Consideration will also be given to those thresholds in guild formation where guilds draw in new members.

The 'outs' of guild formation

Formation in guilds is not merely about the type of raider that guilds want inside their guild, it is also about what a guild decides belongs *outside* of its framework or construct—what is undesirable and unwanted. This notion of the outside of formation is well expressed by guilds when in pursuit of new membership. And oftentimes these ideas of what belongs on the 'outside' is linked the atmosphere and goals that are important to the guild. This creates a kind of threshold of belonging, a vocabulary of distinction that specifies the guild's formation. This section will consider the significant elements, as identified by guilds themselves in their written guild information or advertisements, and the means by which guilds identify the outside, and those thresholds of belonging, in relation to their formation goals.

> We want people who aren't turds or dildos.— Eternal Reign

This colourfully expressed sentiment by the guild Eternal Reign, suggests a process of naming the outside that can recur quite often when guilds describe themselves to potential recruits or curious onlookers. This naming process can either use *negatively descriptive epithets* such as 'turd' or 'dildo', slang terms with derogatory connotations, or identified *unwanted player characteristics* such as 'arrogant' or 'hypocritical', as the EU guild Offspring notes below.

> You're not arrogant, hypocritical or loot hungry.—Offspring

Another means by which guilds identify what they consider 'outside' of their guild's formation is in terms of *undesirable game behaviour*. Being 'loot hungry' suggests a player whose desire for loot (loot being game items that a player can equip his or her character to improve its performance) is excessive and outside the acceptable parameters of the guild. As loot is seen as benefiting the individual more than the group[78], a raider who appears 'loot hungry' could be perceived as being disadvantageous to the group's greater goals, particularly if the group determines that it would benefit more from giving a certain piece of 'loot' from a dead raid boss to another player who may appear to need it more, thus suggesting that need may outweigh desire (hunger). Gigantor extends this idea of undesirable traits—'annoying'—or derogatory epithets—'emo, or just a general douchebag'—to predict the resulting treatment of a raider exhibits this undesirable behaviour within that guild's environment: 'you'll find yourself marginalized quickly'.

> If you're annoying, emo, or just a general douchebag then you'll find yourself marginalized quickly. You are expected to treat other people on the server with respect. We detest forum and trade chat trolling and if we find you spamming crude/idiotic/inflammatory remarks on either forums or in game, you will be removed from the guild.—Gigantor

This prediction of marginalization does not merely relate to what the guild does not want in its formation, but also to what kinds of behaviours are not tolerated by established guild members; behaviours which will result in marginalization or group exclusion. Even a combination of undesirable elements are identified by

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[78] Though groups do benefit from items, the group is less particularly by which individual has the item as compared to its general benefit.

Gigantor when it uses a term like 'detest' to describe an undesirable behaviour, 'forum and trade chat trolling', with 'trolling' being a prime example of an epithet of undesirable behaviour. Trolling can be described as a widespread online-based activity where an individual or group of like-minded individuals instigate harassment, conflict or tension or false alarm amongst its targeted online community by either posting erroneous, contradictory or inflammatory statements. For a guild like Gigantor, a raider member of the guild found trolling will face significant penalties ('you will be removed from the guild') if found to be 'spamming' (typing the same thing repeatedly over a short period of time) 'crude/idiotic/inflammatory' remarks. Such a degree of specificity about unacceptable behaviour, what is *outside* the guild's formative goals, is a frequent feature of these guild advertisements. These concerns are not just about the behaviour the guild wants exclude, it is also about its perception by the outside: retaining 'respect' on the game server. This emphasis in delineating the 'outside' shows that for a guild their very formation is based around not only what they want to see in their guild but also what they wants to keep outside and how they want others to view them. They are also prepared to move raiding members 'outside' their formation as soon as that member begins to exhibit qualities or traits or behaviours that do not belong within their localized formation.

For a raiding guild, those factors that appear as 'outside' formation also appear related to the guild's goals and social atmosphere. These notions of what belongs on the outside are also connected to the dynamic of perceived balance inside the raiding guild. As an example, the guild Pulse's atmosphere and the guild's goals are invoked in relation to the relationship between social and goal-oriented priorities it finds unattractive in prospective members. It's not just about the types of priorities, it's also about the ways in which these priorities interact and express themselves. Guilds appear to desire certain characteristics but reject them if their balance or emphasis does not fit the ideals of the group.

> If you only care about progress and not a 'Fun' environment then please do not bother. Similarly, if you only care about 'Fun' but have not or don't invest time into maximizing your character then do not bother . We are looking for players that are well balanced in playstyle/skill AND attitude.—Pulse

What is compelling about the aforementioned statement is the fact that while Pulse wants to have raiders in its guild who appreciate a "fun' environment', they do not want this orientation toward 'fun' to be a more significant interest than their other stated value: that raiders 'invest time in maximizing your character'. And the same runs true in reverse. A desire for 'progress' should not overpower the 'fun' of the guild's environment. Their desire for a 'well balanced' player as it relates to both performance and sociality appears a priority for this guild and helps identify that which they find undesirable: anything that is out of balance.

Drama, or a 'drama free' environment, appears a recurring theme in what guilds identify as undesirable in their guild. 'Drama' and its causes are designated as an undesirable feature of these guilds, viewed as 'outside' formation. For Loot FTW, the idea of a socially competent member, one that knows 'how to interact with other people without causing any tension or drama' appears paramount when adding to the formation.

The attitude of being free of drama is so often reiterated by other guilds, suggesting that this kind of atmosphere is highly prized, as stated by the guild The Old Guard, 'We do our best to maintain a social, drama-free and light-hearted environment.' The notion of freedom from drama is not the only area of concern highlighted by raiding guilds, however. In the case of the guild Play (see below), the connection between the mind-set of maturity in the guild combined with a 'drama free' environment is positioned as a distinguishing feature of the guild and its low tolerance for poor behaviour such as elitism, drama or instigation of negative behaviour or attitudes.

> We are a mature, DRAMA FREE (we can honestly say that), fun, hardcore raiding guild. We are a tight-knit group that enjoys raiding and having fun at the same time. We feel when you're good, you can progress, and still have fun doing it. We do no tolerate loot %**!@s, elitists, drama queens, or instigators of any type. —Play

This emphasis on a rejection of negatively perceived social *types* 'outside' guild formation includes what it refers to as 'instigators of any type'. There is an idea emerging here (based on these excerpts) that suggests guilds seek to create a kind

of utopianesque formation where any undesirables that impact a guild's ability to enjoy 'raiding' and have 'fun at the same time' provides a guild with both the power to form their own localized culture and environment and to build barriers of exclusion to identify, at least textually, what they might view as a threat to a guild's formation. This echoes Galloway's suggestion of the different ways that the gamic is expressed in the game environment (2006): there are functions of a guild that relate directly to diegetic gameplay (such as the actual raiding) and others that appear non-diegetic in scope (such as the desire to be a 'drama free', 'fun' and 'tight-knit group'). Its non-diegetic atmosphere appears as critical to its diegetic one. In the case of the exclusion from formation, the many ways by which guilds have engaged with the 'outs' of formation suggests their ability to localize formation and do so in complex and overlapping ways.

A threshold of belonging: guild recruitment

Guild formation begins with the admission of new members. This process takes on different forms and functions differently depending on where the guild might be in its development and on its lifecourse, but for many raiding guilds notions of formation entails a level of expectation for prospective new members, including what the ideals are for belonging; the guild's atmosphere and attitude; and how a guild goes about recruiting and drawing in new members. These identifiers and processes allow for formation on a local level, meaning formation that is relevant to that guild only. The following section explores guilds' practices of member recruitment. While the outcome is that new members will become part of the guild's local community and help meet its goals, the ways in which this recruitment and formation process is enacted can vary significantly, as my exploration of two different guilds, Bridgeburners and Paragon, will show in the following section.

Recruitment and retention are of significant concern to raiding guilds, including an often complex application, trial membership period and subsequent membership expectations. This oft-complex process of recruitment and application appears more like an application for a job than one for a group in a

game and as suggested by the following two excerpts. For Taralish, guild officer from Bridgeburners, having an 'elaborate recruitment process' (see p. 172) ensures that the guild remains viable and afloat; and for Taldy, raiding member of the guild Imperium, his membership application helped him secure employment:

> When I applied to Imperium I used the same answers to questions in a job and I got the job. I almost copied my application to Imperium to the job situation. (Taldy, Mumble interview, Imperium guild, October 2011)

This striking statement suggests the *legitimacy* and *seriousness* of the applicant gaining membership in a guild and the complexity in the guild application itself.

> Server ranking does matter to me, <u>because it ensures we get at least some decent applications in per month</u> and being first gives a lot less stress and drama when learning a new boss.... <u>Being the first choice (generally) for people to apply really helps keeping the death weights to a minimum.</u> (Taralish, Bridgeburners, guild site text interview, March 2011)

For Taralish, a number of other factors also feature prominently when she considers effective recruitment, namely the fact that good guild performance by a competitive guild can attract better quality applications ('it ensures we get at least some decent applications') and a consistent process of recruitment ensuring stability for their guild. She refers to the guild's recruitment approach as one of the guild's 'systems'. This kind of organizational and systematic approach to guild management suggests a formalization of the raiding process through specific organizing principles. It is not merely a loosely structured gathering of like-minded players, but a systematic and coordinated group intent on stability and retention.

> I think because we have a few systems in place that ensures we have a stable basis. We have <u>a very strict recruitment policy.</u> Meaning <u>everyone gets a say when we get a decent application in</u>. Since it's done in our internal forums <u>people tend to be a lot more active and serious about discussing</u> them. They feel less restricted when posting.
>
> When an applicant gets enough good comments, <u>we have a chat with that person</u> asking more questions and getting a feel for the person. <u>If that turns out good the trial can start, and we use a mentor system for that.</u> Trials get a person assigned which helps them explain our tactics and help with any other stuff they might

>   need. Also we have a post which tells them the basic stuff about our raids and
>   dkp system. (Taralish, Bridgeburners, guild site text interview, March 2011)

This 'recruitment policy' does not merely indicate a fundamental building block of this raiding guild, but is also 'very strict' by design. Taralish references the fact that the guild utilizes a group decision-making process in relation to new applicants, which then results in a 'chat' with the applicant to give the guild a 'feel for the person'. This complex and elaborate process is more suggestive of a job application (as supported by Taldy's comments above) than anything informal or casual that might be ordinarily presumed about a game. And that kind of complexity, with its trial process and mentoring system built in as well, seems supported and almost expected by the guild members who are 'active and serious' in their consideration, by means of a transparent and 'less restricted' dialogue, of every new applicant.

>   At the end of <u>a long trial period</u> (4 weeks, which can be made longer if they have
>   been afk a lot) there is <u>a guild wide vote</u>, with a very small margin. Two no votes
>   can already fail a trial. <u>So when you get in, you have been through quite an ordeal
>   and we are fairly sure we made the right decision adding you.</u> With us being so
>   picky we ensure a certain culture, gathering the same sort of people, which has
>   served us well.
>   Of course we have had some mistakes, <u>when we were desperate for
>   raiders,</u> but since the level of the others are relatively high we have some room to
>   carry people. All those moments when we needed to compromise resulted in a
>   suboptimal addition. (Taralish, Bridgeburners, guild site text interview, March
>   2011)

Taralish then elaborates on the complexity and duration of the trial period, to which all new members must adhere, including a mentor and a final 'guild wide vote'. Even the final vote has a 'very small margin' with even two votes against an applicant resulting in failure. Taralish identifies and acknowledges this process as 'quite an ordeal', thus seeming to resonate with the duality of meaning that is inherent in the term 'trial'. Even the mistakes in recruitment—'when we were desperate for raiders'—are balanced by the fact that the guild culture is built on this complex, yet protective approach to recruitment aimed at ensuring that only those raiders who meet the requirements of the guild are brought into the guild itself. Can the process help protect the 'culture' that Taralish appears eager to ensure? For Bridgeburners in particular, a guild with an over 5-year lifespan (significant when one considers that the game of WoW itself is a little over seven

years old as of this writing), this process is viewed as integral to sustaining the guild, and has at least in some way contributed to its longevity.

In fact, the other systems Taralish references below speak to the meaning and value of a guild's membership and its retention. The 'very large dkp system'[79] that Taralish credits for minimising 'guild drama' (a reminder of the earlier assertions of guilds) and the notion of rotation, or allowing raiders to move in and out of the raid group, thus giving more members a chance to play in any given evening. These ideas of not being forced to 'sit on the bench' (thus being able to meaningfully contribute to and participate in the group's activities) during a raid and being fairly compensated for one's efforts which suggests cultural norms of a place of long term association more than a casual game environment.

> Next to <u>the elaborate recruitment process</u> we have a very large dkp system in place. Dkp in my experience has been the root of many guild dramas, so having one which sorts out as much as possible leaves little room for people to feel stuff is being handled unfair.
>
>   We also rotate during the night, so people don't have to sit all night, but know they can get some action when they want. (Taralish, Bridgeburners, guild site text interview, March 2011)

In contrast to Bridgeburners' 'elaborate recruitment process', the guild Paragon seems more oriented toward minimizing the process itself, preferring to front-load the system to strip away any undesired new recruits from the guild before they even apply, as my discussion with Sejta, Paragon's guild leader, indicates.

> Ladan: How do you choose new members for the guild? What is the most important thing you want to see?

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[79] A DKP (dragon kill points) system is an in-game process of rewarding attendance and performance wherein players accrue 'points' for things like being on time, being prepared for the raid, and contributing to the kill of a raid boss that they can spend on items dropped by raid bosses. The more points you have, the likelier it is that you can win an item that others are also bidding on as the player with the most points will usually win an item. This process represents a kind of motivational incentive for regularity in attendance and performance. Not all guilds use this process, however. Some have a 'council' (a small group of the guild, typically the raid leader and a few officers) that dictate who receives loot and others might just use a simple chance roll (where you basically spin a metaphorical dial and the person with the highest roll [out of, say, 100] wins that item).

> Sejta: to not be bothered all the time we have stated in our pages that <u>u need to be top 100 or something in former experience</u>
>
> Sejta: and <u>the most important thing is that they can make time to raid during progress</u>
>
> Sejta: = flexible work/school
>
> Sejta: if they cant make them for raiding during progress we dont do anything with them
>
> Ladan: How does your trial work for new members?
>
> Sejta: they get in and raid
>
> Sejta: then when we feel like it they r members
>
> Sejta: nothing special
>
> Sejta: and when we recruit I ask them everything possible
>
> Sejta: <u>and if they speak the truth they will fit into our guild 100%</u>
>
> (Sejta, Paragon, IRC text interview, May 2011)

As one of the world's top ranked guilds[80], Paragon requires that its members be able to converse in Finnish[81], have an orientation toward flexibility and availability in relation to the time commitment (and by expecting 95-100% availability during raiding progress times) and previous experience as a raider in a top-100 ranked raiding guild. This degree of specialization in the prerequisites to apply to the guild, with no room for discussion ('if they can't make them for raiding during progress we don't do anything with them') helps Sejta ensure a more streamlined recruitment process. He mentions a complex and involved interview or application review process by means of asking 'them everything possible and if they speak the truth they will fit into our guild 100%.' In a way, Sejta is suggesting that due to the close-knit community of raiders in his guild and the performance and outcomes-based nature of raiding—the fact that they can verify performance with available data—the 'truth' will become apparent once the raider gets 'in' and raids. Even the trial process is viewed as more of a relationship to notions of belonging than a robust recruitment system, 'when we feel like it they r members'. In the case of Paragon, their application process may seem less formalized than Bridgeburners', and the trial period may be resolved through a 'feeling' (a somewhat ambiguous affective experience) rather than a 'guildwide

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[80] DREAM Paragon consistently held the world number one spot between Sept 2009 and December 2011. The most recent tier (tier 13, December 2011) resulted in a loss of ranking from first to fourth in the 25-man race and fifth in the overall race (25- and 10-man combined).

[81] http://www.paragon.fi/contact#recruitment. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

vote' in the case of Bridgeburners, but 'everything possible' is considered with a potential new member.

The nature and scope of a raiding guild's approach to recruitment and retention may vary based on the culture of that specific guild, but the goal is often the same: stability. That stability is managed in different ways, but helps ensure the guild's lifespan and ability to meet its goals. For Sejta this is 'nothing special' but this 'feeling' that he and his guild mates have as to the suitability of a new member suggests they rely on a connection with these new members to provide a sense of belonging and formation that can be characterised by these complex and well-delineated guild formations. For Taralish, the fact that Bridgeburners puts its members through 'quite an ordeal' in order to make 'the right decision' to bring a new raider into their guild is worth it to prevent a 'suboptimal addition'. Formation through recruitment is about preventing a 'suboptimal' (Taralish) addition by taking steps to ensure the new member 'will fit into our guild' (Sejta). It is about protecting and perpetuating its arrangement, or formation, of players in a persistent environment. *Protection* by utilizing the function of recruitment as a threshold of exclusion for ensuring undesirable ('suboptimal') elements are not brought into guild formation, and *perpetuation* by using recruitment as a threshold of belonging to draw in new members to add to the guilds' formation ('time to raid during progress') and meet its goals. The following section will expand on this notion of a guild's perpetuation by the arrangement of its internal formation.

The 'ins' of guild formation

While the process of formation in raiding guilds is partly dictated by what the guild wants to exclude (keeping things 'outside'), it is also about what they want to include (what they want to keep 'in'). The purpose of this section is to consider the ways in which guilds identify what they want to include in their guild's formation. Attitude, atmosphere and an orientation toward raiding formation appear to emerge often as recurring desirable qualities among members of a raiding guild.

For a raiding guild like Inner Sanctum, when seeking members, desirable members have a mature attitude:

> * Be mature both in age and attitude (don't bother applying if you are 15).

> * Tolerance for any kind of vent conversations outside raiding times (you will be tested on this as we joke around on vent a lot!).—Inner Sanctum

In fact, for Inner Sanctum the concern over 'maturity' is not merely represented as an *idealised characteristic* but is also represented as a minimum age requirement, 'don't bother applying if you are 15'. The desire to include raiders who not only meet a minimum age requirement, but have a maturity level and an openness to the guild's established attitude helps frame the guild's formation; this is re-echoed in other guilds' self-descriptors, such as the following example from the guild Angered:

> *Patient: Definitely*
>
> *Mature: Totally*
>
> *+18?: Yeah, I govern my own life*

In the case of the Angered, the desire for appropriately aged players (over 18) who are able to 'govern' their lives and thus their ability to play is succinctly listed as central to their guild's functioning. These notions of attitude and even patience help to paint a picture of what organizing principles guilds like Angered (or Inner Sanctum above) factor into their ideal guild formation.

For the guild Pendulum, the idea of 'not stress[ing]' or behaving like 'kids normally do' reinforces a guild promoting an atmosphere of maturity. In fact, they go on to stress their ideal: 'We are an adult guild in that the majority of players are adults covering a vast range of ages, professions and real life responsibilities.' This notion of adulthood contrasts with the perceived undesirability of acting like 'kids'. And finally, Pendulum adds yet another quality or value that helps shape its guild atmosphere, 'we're looking for polite players'. Appropriate behaviour, it appears, is not just related to maturity, humour or

patience but also to how players might treat each other within the guild itself, its 'social intelligence' as the guild Loot FTW describes it.

> **Social intelligence**: We spend a lot of time together talking, joking and raiding, and for everyone to be able to have a good time it is important that you know how to interact with other people without causing any tension or drama.

Loot FTW expects 'social intelligence' which suggests and stresses the importance of the formation of a specific atmosphere and attitude in the raiding guild. This is carried forward in the description that Envy provides of its 'ideal' raider and guild formation where values of competition, social ability and responsiveness are highlighted alongside maturity, like-mindedness and respect as idealised characteristics of its raiding guild.

> As a community we are naturally competitive, this means you need to be socially capable and respond well to pressure of all kinds. While we do not endorse abusive behaviour, all raiders should be mature enough to be able to take some teasing and heat when situations arise. Raid spots are earned, not given.
>
> If you think you have what it takes, in return you can expect to become part of a guild which love hardcore raiding, a strong community of like-minded individuals all working toward the same goal. A mature community which values your life outside of WoW and will respect it as you respect us.—**Envy**

Envy expresses its predilection for competition. As my exploration of competition suggests in Chapter 7, many raiding guilds are oriented toward expressing competition in play. What is striking, however, in the excerpt above is Envy's reference that because of its competitively oriented atmosphere, it *expects* that its membership be both 'socially capable' and able to 'respond well to pressure of all kinds'. These notions might suggest that raiding guilds of all types, even the most competitive, value their social atmosphere as an effective strategy to navigate the competitive experience of play. And while it also echoes the desire of many guilds that its members be 'mature enough', it is careful to place that within the context of its interactive banter ('take some teasing and heat'), almost suggesting that maturity is a coping strategy for the social climate of the guild. And its subsequent statement—'Raid spots are earned, not given'—almost resonates as a kind of reward (or punishment) of meeting (or not meeting) the formative expectations of the guild (of 'maturity', being 'socially capable', and have that ability to 'respond well to pressure of all kinds'). And perhaps nothing

supports the idea that guilds form their own kind of idealised local formation as Envy's own reference to itself as a 'strong community with like-minded individuals'.

And while these idealizations of guild formation are often stated by individual guilds, considering the ways by which guilds arrange themselves internally, primarily for the purposes of coordinating and forming raiding activity, can help shape a perspective from inside a guild and how its formation is designed to perpetuate its primary goal: to engage in raiding gameplay. These will be considered in the following sections.

Raid formation activity and coordination

Raiding guilds exist for one primary purpose: to raid. Their atmosphere, attitude and membership may differ and remain specific to that guild's culture, but the goal of raiding in some form or other is ever-present in these guilds. This section explores how specific raiding activity is coordinated by studying formation and planning of raids: guild expectations for preparation and the approach to failure or learning. (My exploration of action in raiding in Chapter 6 is a far more in-depth study of the relationship between raiding and action, while this section is limited to the notion of raiding activity from a formation perspective.)

The function of raid formation is as varied and complex as the ways in which guilds form and arrange themselves. A raid leader[82] is part facilitator, overseer, enforcer, decision-maker, commander and scheduler. Xav, raid leader of the guild Premonition, acknowledges his role as a 'leader' of the raid, but also notes that the whole raiding team is 'encouraged' to talk and 'help out' during a raid or in the planning process. His role is reminiscent of a facilitator, keeping the raid moving', trying to minimize downtime, and preventing 'discussions from 'carrying on'. Raiding becomes a process that requires holistic oversight for its execution.

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[82] A raid leader is a guild member who is primarily responsible for planning, coordinating and executing raid activity for the guild. Some guilds have more than one raid leader.

> I (xav) am the primary 'raid leader', however everyone in the guild is encouraged to talk and help out with things, and people frequently do so. I mainly do things like keep the raid moving, try to minimize downtime, and prevent discussions from carrying on for too long if they aren't important/going anywhere. The individual assignments are handled by the collective players coming to agreements with a few key players usually spearheading it in their respective channels (tanking, healing, etc).Tluas/segolene will usually be doing healing discussion and getting all the healers involved to find out what makes the most sense. I'll talk with the tanks to find out who wants to do what role and if they want any changes to be made. If we need DPS to do something, we usually talk about it briefly on vent and then have them discuss any other specifics in their class channels. (Xav, Premonition, guild site text correspondence, April 2011)

Sejta, guild and raid leader of Paragon, utilizes a similar approach to leading the team. His aim of thinking 'about everyone in the raid' and endeavouring to be 'fair as possible for everyone' suggests a facilitator of raiding intent on fair play and full inclusion, but is quick to acknowledge that progress raiding (particularly when it meets the goals of a guild highly oriented toward External Competition such as a guild like Paragon) requires that you 'cant be fair to everyone in playtime', particularly when the guild wants to 'get results'.

> Sejta: I always think about <u>everyone in the raid</u>
>
> Sejta: I want to be as <u>fair as possible for everyone</u>
>
> Sejta: but I also know that <u>to get results</u> u cant be fair to everyone in playtime etc and hopefully most ppl understand why they dont get playtime
>
> (Sejta, Paragon, IRC text interview, May 2011)

So part schedule manager and part overseer, Sejta also wears the mantle of decision-maker, which feels suggestive of the sci-fi TV series' Star Trek's Captain Jean-Luc Picard's conference table where he takes in suggestions and renders the final decision, 'I listen to everyones idea and use what seems good'. Although perhaps Sejta does not merely stop there. His approach to *compiling the ideas into a working tactic* seems more suggestive of a group decision-making process. He asserts that relying so heavily on the ideas and feedback of the group supports his decision-making when the decision is 'hard'.

> Sejta: I'm flexible I listen what everyone has to say

> Sejta: and then make the decision
>
> Sejta: when we get to a new encounter I listen to everyones idea and use what seems good
>
> Sejta: compile all the ideas to a working tactic
>
> Sejta: then if I have to make the hard decision I can make it if its better for the guild
>
> Sejta: and I'm not seeking advantage for myself
>
> <div align="right">(Sejta, Paragon, IRC text interview, May 2011)</div>

This kind of measured and group-oriented decision making process is not necessarily a quiet or calm affective experience, as other members of Paragon have told me. Manni, a raider in Paragon, reflects on his trial period where he had to learn to speak up to be heard during the gaming process: 'I remember lazeil[83] teasing me in the earlier raids when i tried to 'save the raid' by pointing out something urgent, but I didn't yell it out to be heard over the usually babble and nobody else noticed :)'.[84] And so while the process that Sejta points to enables a preferentially group decision-making process using VOIP while they raid (as does Xav's although in a more controlled, facilitator/compiler like manner), the inevitable consequence is a kind of aural overlap that the team must adapt to in order to support this approach. Listening to an excerpt (see recording 5.1 below) of a recorded progression raiding session with members of the raiding guild Method (I discuss the events surrounding this recording in greater detail in Chapter 7, pp. 295–308) can provide an idea of this cacophony of sound. While not a consistently loud experience—in fact there can be a great deal of silence during raiding—the voices do overlap and build in momentum as the complexity or urgency of the fight requires and it is this navigation of the auditory while attempting to prevent the process of failure that can provide a compelling impression of the intensity of failure and the ways in which raiders respond during the process of or in an attempt to circumvent failure in the pursuit of success. It also shows how the formation of raid activity becomes this multisensory, multi-player engagement in gameplay.

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[83] One of Paragon's guild members and officers.

[84] IRC text interview, February 2011.

Recording 5.1. Sample of progression raiding discussion over VOIP, Method, July 2011. *Source:* Method. Used with permission.

In the case of a guild like Solidarity, the process of raid formation and coordination also hints at this kind of surrender to the perceived chaos of learning through failure, though on a far more emphasized level. At least that's how Solidarity's raid and guild leader Ballorasteel perceived his guild in relation to what he presumes other guilds do while learning a new boss fight.

> Ours is a weird way, other guilds just pull a boss once and then have a structured discussion and some method to it. We can't really do it, I don't know why, people don't really have the patience for that, When we progress we pull the boss, get back in, pull again. We have a sort of steamroll attitude to progression unlike some other guilds. Obviously we do discuss what went wrong, but we take a very steamroll attitude instead and we might rework strategies overnight, but yes very steamroll unlike other guilds. We might do even better if we sit back and talk about it but I don't think anyone has the patience for that. (Ballorasteel, Solidarity, VOIP Interview, June 2011)

For Solidarity, the process of *actively learning through failure* is a value of the guild's formation and is preferable to sitting back and talking about the encounter or doing any significant planning before the group attempts an encounter. While they do 'discuss what went wrong', the idea of discussing (or planning) before doing appears unappealing to them as a guild that seems driven to 'steamroll' due to a lack of patience, at least that's what Ballorasteel thinks might be going on. Even the time spent discussing or analysing the group's failure appears limited to

the short period between wipes while the group is re-entering the raiding instance to try the fight again, as Simplez says:

> After every wipe we'll just talk about why we wiped during the run back pretty much and figure out the reason we had wiped on the run back and then change the tactics if it can be done, if not we try to play better like move out of shit and all that sort of stuff. (Simplez, Solidarity, VOIP interview, June 2011)

It's not just about trying new tactics, it's also about accepting and noticing where player skill needs to factor into any effective boss fight. How the guild approaches these ideas of planning, decision-making and performing can dictate the group's success. These aforementioned examples point to the varied and complex (and at times simple) ways in which guilds approach the formation and planning of raiding activity. The idea of gamic action in raiding with its particular approach to planning and discussion, however, does appear integral to the raiding experience. In the example of Solidarity, a guild that accepts the process of failure as part of the process of overcoming that raid boss, a guild will navigate its raiding activity accordingly.

As just mentioned, the idea of failure during a raid is not novel in raiding. Failure is part of the everyday lived experience of raiding. Guilds will often report conducting hundreds of attempts on one single raid encounter before finally determining the right tactic and approach to help them succeed. And how that guild navigates the recurring interaction with failure can often determine its overall effectiveness as a group. But as Simplez notes above, sometimes the tactic just fails because it is ineffective against the boss and sometimes a group fails because it has not performed the tactic correctly. The idea of a controllable or fixable mistake can weigh heavily in a guild's approach to raiding playtime, as described by Ballorasteel (of Solidarity) below:

> As I've said in the past, I've never actually shouted at someone who's admitted they've made a mistake; they'll own that. I don't like when someone knows they made a mistake and won't own it, and we go through 10 logs to find out who made it. It's just when they know it and don't say it... Some people might even not like to admit they make a mistake at the end of the day. No one wants to sit there and say yeah, it was me who wasted 10 minutes of everyone's time. So they try to be quiet, but that's the worst option. (VOIP interview, June 2011)

Ballorasteel's comments are reflective of Sejta's earlier comment about truthfulness among raiders. If a raider 'owns' a mistake and speaks up about it, that won't evoke a negatively critical reaction from the raid leader, in this case Ballorasteel. His aversion relates to when raiders are reluctant to admit to a mistake, thus causing a time consuming review and analysis of the group's failure and an eventual, albeit unpleasant finger pointing at the mistake-causing raider in the end. In a persistent game environment where groups have played together for years and all action is recordable, remaining silent can be disadvantageous. This idea of 'everyone's time' being wasted by forcing the group to investigate the mistake becomes an aversive experience that elevates the error to an inconvenience above and beyond that one wipe. This indicates a preference, at least in the case of Solidarity, for a transparent atmosphere of performance accountability in the raiding environment. Yes, they seem to be saying, mistakes do happen, but own up to them so we can learn from them and move on.

This acceptance of the process of failure—or more commonly referred to as 'wiping' below should be embraced like 'your first love' (as below). And coupled with the acceptance of failure is the ability of raiders to respond to feedback (often given in the form of, and referred to as, criticism). This notion of 'thriving' on criticism is also echoed by Loot FTW, which expects its raiders to 'handle and respond' to criticism, which they refer to as 'at times extremely fierce' and which Inner Sanctum calls 'harsh as it may be at times'.

> * Wiping on new content was your first love.
> * Able to thrive on criticism, as harsh as at may be at times.—Inner Sanctum
>
> You need to be able to both listen and talk on ventrilo. Whether your are unsure about an aspect of a encounter or want to suggest something you must speak up. You also need to be able to handle and respond to any (and at times extremely fierce) criticism.—Loot FTW

The raiding guild wants its raiders to be responsive and open to direct feedback. It also wants its raiders to 'speak up' with questions or suggestions. It does not imply a formation that is reliant on passivity but rather one that expects active involvement, participation, observation and response. This reflects Solidarity's earlier comments with their time-pressed urgency to just keep 'steamrolling'—to

be engaged. As a result, raiders are expected to be open about mistakes, responsive to feedback, and adaptable to change. And this carries forward when considering the notion of the team and how that team's formation should look. The raiding guild Play expects its players to be 'willing to sit' (where the raider is on standby until needed) and to accept that the team's needs may outweigh the individual members' desire to play. This was reinforced by Sejta's own comments above where he acknowledged that some of his own raiders had to sacrifice their own play time to benefit the group's goals. As Play puts it:

> Be willing to sit. Working hard modes/heroic modes, we need to min/max raid compositions. If you are sat, be parked outside (or able to be contacted) in case you are needed.

And this expectation of self-sacrifice for the group's needs does not merely stop at the willingness of the raider to be benched from the raid[85]. They must also ensure they are available in the event of being needed, which includes ensuring the group can contact the raider outside the game if necessary and this from a guild that self-identifies as casually oriented, thus less driven to pursue a time-intensive structure. This kind of arrangement during and around the activity of raiding formalizes the structure of commitment and expectation in a guild. The reliance is on each raider effective contribution to that guild's delineated formation and its subsequent success appears integral to many of the guilds that choose to arrange themselves in such a formal manner. The *formation of raiding activity* is not only integral to a raiding guild's function, but also has within it a series of affordances expressed in various ways: leadership styles tailored to facilitate the raiding activity; a process for decision-making and planning; a transparent approach to failure, criticism and learning; and an expectation of and for commitment and availability to the team. These formations suggest a way in which large groups not only arrange themselves but how they work through planning raiding activity with its proneness to failure and logistical complexity.

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[85] Being 'sat out' can be a difficult experience for a raider. In an interview with Kruf, I asked him how it felt to be the raider sat out on the bench during a crucial raiding fight for the guild. His response was simply: 'Absolutely terrible.' (IRC interview, January 2011)

<u>Preparing for the raid</u>

How a guild approaches formation in raiding is not just about arranging the action of raiding, as we explored in the earlier section. It also relates to how raiders (and the guild) approach formation in preparation for the raid, particularly when looking at the deskspace. For a persistent game environment like WoW, certain technical expectations are often in place for a raider, and typically set as requirements by the guild itself to be prepared for raid activity. The set-up requirements of the deskspace is significant in raid formation and is representative of the arrangement of non-diegetic space (and action) by the raider and its subsequent expectation on the part of the raiding guild. This set-up often takes the form of peripheral hardware, software technologies, internet connection speeds and even the quality of the computer being used[86]. For some, the difference between success and failure is represented through the provision of these technologies or expectations for preparation. Consider the following example offered by a member of Solidarity about the use of a microphone and voice-over-IP software during a raid:

> If they don't physically have a microphone we won't take them in, because what role you play you may need to speak at some point. So two interrupters came in this expansion. You have so many interrupt fights and without talkers ; one of them never talks and one didn't have a mic. And you have so many interrupt fights in this fight. If they should have crowd controlled and could not call out for help, then it causes problems for us. So lately we've cracked down on that a lot more because certain communications might come up where you need a microphone. (VOIP interview, June 2011)

Due to the ongoing planning and arranging of activity during any given boss encounter, the expectation for a raider to be able to communicate becomes paramount. This not only minimizes the unnecessary failures that occur when a group is learning new raid content, but can also help expedite the learning process. It also reinforces an idea that the raid leader is not the only valued or expected communicator during a raid: the raid depends on all members, particularly those with specific roles during specific fights. So it's not about the 'need to speak' as mentioned above, it's also about the desire for 'people to be involved'. The non-diegetic preparation of the raiding space becomes integral not only to that raider's effective gameplay experience, but also impacts the guild to

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[86] See my discussion about the significance of the deskspace in gamic action in Chapter 6.

which he or she belongs and has a direct bearing on that guild's ability to arrange its raid play. (I will further expand on the significance of the overlapping forms of gamic action and space in Chapter 6.)

Preparing for raiding is, in a way, a function of managing the non-diegetic aspects of the game, from a spatial and action perspective and also from the perspective of the individual's role in preparing for raiding activity. The raider is expected to not only have their desk- and gamespace arranged for raiding (as a nondiegetic operator act) but also anticipate and attempt to prevent nondiegetic machine acts that result in what Galloway refers to as 'the disabling act', those events seemingly beyond the control of the raider, yet deemed mitigable to at least a certain extent. The pursuit of technical 'stability' represents an attempt to exert control over the non-diegetic machine acts (random or bad luck events) in raiding. For Inner Sanctum, a good internet connection is integral to formation when they expect a raider to have a 'rock solid connection and pc' since 'even if you do 40000 dps or hps being offline doesn't help anyone'. This idea of stability is not only referenced in terms of the guild's cohesion or culture, but is also a basic building block of participation in raiding activity itself. Perhaps the following excerpt is a telling indicator of the importance of stability (and control over the non-diegetic) that Loot FTW references the word 'stable' (or a derivative of it) four times. The guild does not want a raider to apply unless they have a stable set up.

> You must have a stable internet connection with a stable computer, if you have a history of frequent disconnects or game crashes we recommend that you fix those before applying. Periods of instability will severely impact your trial period and you may be replaced on progress periods if it occurs then.

Exploring the ways that guilds sustain or perpetuate their formation in a persistent environment has been the focal point of this section. How a guild structures itself, organizes its raids and even prepares for raiding activity are seen, according to these accounts, as integral to a guild's formation and, it would seem, its perpetuation. Being prepared, being well organized and being 'right' for the guild all work together to define the specifics of guild formation. But what happens when things change? How does a guild adapt or respond to the

accidental and intentional changes in formation, impacted from within or without? The following section will consider change, primarily from the perspective of one raiding guild and its crisis of persistence in the raiding environment.

Exploring changes in guild formation

This chapter has so far focused primarily on the ways in which guild formation is dependent on a guild's establishment of parameters of belonging (the outside and inside) and has explored the means by which the guild constructs its processes of recruitment and retention of members. If raiding guilds invest time and energy into structuring and then protecting their formation, then any shifts or changes to that formation could provide a fitting means by which to further study its complexity. In the case of guild formation, recruitment, retention and revision are constant activities that not only shape a raiding guild's identity and orientation, but also represent the organizing principles of the raiding community. This section explores how revision, or change, plays an important role in the guild's formation and can even impact its localized culture, depending on the nature and scope of change. Change in formation will be explored through one raiding guild as it faced possible threats to its ability to continue raiding.[87]

Perhaps nowhere does the individuality of a raiding guild become more evident than when change or revision to its formation visits it. In the group-oriented environment of raiding, long term formation is subject to the transitions of players often engaged in shifts in gameplay orientation and interest. While guild recruitment and member retention are significant issues for raiding guilds, shifts in guild formation can impact the distinctive nature of a guild as well. These accidental or intentional changes to guild formation can have a catalytic impact on groups, both positively and adversely. Shifts in guild formation are most

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[87] All of the content that I include in this section comes from the discussions and information posted on the guild's Web site (www.bridgeburnersguild.net)and forums, along with historical information from the WoW progress tracking site, wowprogress.com.

commonly exhibited through the following actions of *expansion* or *contraction:* guilds disbanding and ceasing to exist as a formal entity (by all members of a guild leaving or being removed); significant growth (by a sudden influx of new members); a shift in guild goals or priorities (such as going from a hard core to a casual raiding schedule or deciding to transition from a levelling guild to a raiding guild); and a significant drop in membership (by members departing or being removed).

My goal here then is to explore the impact of change on a guild by following one guild's crisis of persistence. This is important to studying formation as guilds are not static in nature, they are affected by changes in structure and formation. Changes can affect formation and also impact the way that a guild protects itself. In the case of the guild in question, Bridgeburners is a 25-man raiding guild which was first established in 2008. Their raiding formation began to shift in 2011 when they saw a decrease in the number of new recruits to their guild[88] and an increase in the number of established raiders opting to retire from or stop actively raiding. From a roster of about 35 active raiders earlier in 2011, approximately 28 members departed during 2011. And while new recruits helped reclaim some of the number of departures, the guild still found itself at a ten raider deficit (with only about 25 members) raiding toward the end of 2011. This made raiding at the 25-man size a difficulty for a guild that had been leading the server rankings for the previous two expansions and had slipped to the fourth overall spot on the server. The inability for the group to move past 2/8 raid bosses in the latest tier within 6 weeks was telling proof of the guild's inability to progress at the pace they had grown accustomed to. Their inability to form a 25-man raiding group and progress through the increasingly difficult content was impairing their ability to achieve their goals. This was also reflected by the reduced number of guilds on the game server raiding at the 25-man level over the course of 2011. A drop from approximately twenty five 25-man guilds in late 2010 to four guilds in early 2012 is indicative of the changing face of raiding. Raiding guilds appeared to be

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[88] See my earlier discussion on pp. 169–174 where I explore Bridgeburners' approach to guild recruitment. A correlation could perhaps be drawn between the guild's recruitment ethos and the impact of change on its formation.

gravitating toward the 10-man formation in preference over the 25-man size. Bridgeburners needed to decide what it was going to do: follow the example of other guilds on the server and downsize to 10-man raiding or find a way to sustain its numbers. For guild officer and raid leader, Olog, a decision had to be made by the guild's leadership, which he describes in detail below:

> I made a post on officer forums concerning us losing Taralish as an officer and how Farlap would be quitting soon as well. But while losing two officers made things a bit challenging, just general shortage of players was a more immediate problem. Any decision was seen as having a big impact on the guild so we then decided to make the discussion public which is when Celeus made his public post.
>
> (Olog, Bridgeburners guild, Skype text conversation, April 2012)

By early January the guild leader, Celeus, identified the problem and the possible changes to the guild's formation that the raiders needed to consider:

> Unfortunately the last few weeks/months have seen <u>a large number of people take the decision to stop raiding and we also have a few more whose current work commitments will probably mean they will also be unable to commit to our current raiding schedule in the immediate future.</u> With all of these combining … to undertake <u>a very large recruiting drive</u> to maintain the numbers to keep a viable 25 man raiding roster together. The trouble of course is that there really isn't a huge amount applications incoming recently and there does seem to be less and less people looking for 25 man guilds. <u>The chances of being able to add the required number of people of a good enough quality to allow us to keep progressing heroic modes at a viable pace seem fairly small and would certainly take a while to achieve and gear up possible recruits meaning a holding period in terms of progress.</u> Taking all this into account it's probably realistic to say <u>we need to address things now</u> to see how we can move things forward in a sensible and productive fashion as keeping <u>the status quo won't work at this point.</u>
>
> What we are interested in are <u>people's thoughts or ideas</u> in general terms but also how people feel in terms of personal preference with regards to raiding moving forward. <u>Sort of things that will help figure out viable options are what format of raiding people are keen on (25/10 or either), what sort of schedule (same, less, more) what sort of focus do they want (full focus on progress, relaxed clears with less progress focus).</u> (Guild site forum posting, January 2012)

The striking aspect of this post is that Celeus, the guild leader, applies an honest and democratic approach to outline the guild's current crisis ('the status quo won't work at this point') and engages all members in an 'open debate' to 'figure out viable options'. This democratic and group-oriented discussion is reminiscent of how Taralish enunciated the guild's approach to recruitment decision-making

and its 'guildwide vote'. Status quo for Bridgeburners up until this point had been a 4 day/week raiding schedule for 4-hour long sessions. And while Bridgeburners had a general 75% attendance requirement, it did not have a pre-booking schedule system. Raiders were expected to post if they were going to be 'afk' (away from the keyboard—not available), but otherwise all active players on 'raider' status were expected to log in for the raid sessions. This would allow the raid leaders, typically, the luxury of putting together a group of 25 players out of what was usually 30. Players would be rotated in and out of the group, depending on the particular needs for the fight. The options for Bridgeburners to decide were related, as Celeus notes, to what they needed to change, or re-form, in order to remain 'viable'. Their very guild formation was no longer working. For a guild that had been accustomed to a 'huge amount applications', their 'status quo' of a robust recruitment, dependent on a healthy amount of interest by prospective members was impaired by a change in the climate of raiding, as Celeus notes, 'there does seem to be less and less people looking for 25 man guilds.' This acknowledgement of the difficulty in retaining the guild's current formation had significantly impaired the guild's ability to meet its primary goal: 'to keep progressing heroic modes at a viable pace'.

The subsequent discussion amongst members indicated an initial uncertainty about whether to scale down to do 10-man raiding; find a way to draw in new members through 'very large recruiting drive' to retain the 'status quo' of 25-man raiding; stop raiding all together; or to consider another alternative. A desire to remain connected to the guild's social formation was expressed, even if it meant a change to raiding goals or formation. This discussion illustrates the ways in which, even at the most localized level, the guild can re-form itself. A few select excerpts of the discussion are provided below for the sake of analysis and illustration.

> BB has become a 2nd sort of family and so even if its decided to go 10man progress raiding, I wont be going anywhere and will be raiding right alongside of the rest. (Mezzy, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

people are ... <u>maybe only hanging on to raiding out of loyalty or to help.</u> (Lerue, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

<u>I would like to keep it 25m</u> as i personal love it more. (Gardez, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

<u>I think it's unrealistic to expect to continue as a 25 raiding guild.</u> ... we need high caliber players, and alot of them, recruited to the guild quickly, which I personally don't believe is possible. (Aryadne, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

We'd need about <u>ten more people</u> to have a <u>healthy roster</u>. (Olog, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

There are 10 man guilds struggling to keep their numbers up, on this server and on many other servers. <u>There may be one with likeminded people with a similar level of progress that would consider a merge.</u> (Naathwen, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

True to Celeus' request for 'people's thoughts or ideas', a significant proportion of guild members (twenty three) contributed to the discussion about the future of the guild, with excerpted examples included above. The ideas of downsizing or stopping raiding appear as points for discussion. While some appear to feel that downsizing to 10-man is ideal, others appear to express sadness (Mezzy) about the potential change, though there is a commitment to remain with the guild, regardless the outcome. Others wonder (Lerue) if raiders were only helping out due to a sense of 'loyalty' to the guild and not because they really wanted to. But the bulk of the discussion appears oriented toward the difficulty of securing those 'ten quality players' that Olog feels the guild needs to be able to retain a viable formation with the 25-man content. Even the idea of what makes for a 'healthy roster' is a provocative descriptor of ill-health afflicting the guild in its current state. Perhaps nothing generates as strong a reaction amongst guild members as Naathwen's suggestion of replenishing the guild's numbers through a merger with another guild:

> Merging sounds interesting, but will most likely harm the social quality in BB, and I'm currently not sure if we should do it as our last (desperate?) act to remain 25 (Hinaika, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

> Guild mergers are definately one of those things where it looks and sounds good on paper ; but does not always work in practice. ... a guild merge can lead to two groups of people with growing friction. (Werbil, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

> I apologize if I trample over anyone's dreams here, but a merger is <u>about the worst thing</u> you can possible do. (Daenon, forum post, Bridgeburners, January 2012)

This negativity toward mergers came from a degree of experience and observation by some members. Daenon adds: 'This guild was created from a merger. About 50% came from Ashes, about 40% from Spirit Odyssey and 10% other. Another fun fact: Half a year and a lot of drama later, only Torrq was left from the SO [Spirit Odyssey] part.' So, a guild being built from a merger, was the 'worst' possible thing in Daenon's mind, despite the fact that Bridgeburners was still an active raiding guild four years after its creation from the original merger. He attributes it to the 'drama' that occurred during the original merger and the loss of the majority of one guild in the merger six months later. (And evokes the earlier discussion where many guilds desire a formation that is drama-free [see p. 168].)

Yet an offer of a merger did present itself to the guild. Another guild on the server—Heresy, a 10-man raiding guild—approached Bridgeburners about joining forces to raid together at the 25-man size. As Celeus explained, in a post made several days after the original one,

> [We want to continue] to push raiding with the aim of completing the Heroic content with a group from Heresy who are a 10 man guild on ED with similar progress who are also struggling to consistently fill their raids to form a group of around 33 to push 25 man raiding progress.... Outwardly we appear to share quite a lot in terms raiding times, progress and philosophy so there is a possible basis for this to be examined.

> ... The plan is that the two guilds will undertake joint raids for the next two resets to see how things work. For this period there will be no guild swapping or firm

> long term commitment just a trial period where both sides can see how things work and hopefully if it goes well we will take things to the next stage.
>
> I think this plan is probably the overall best one for us at the current time as there aren't realistically many other ways to get the number of recruits we need to keep raiding 25s and getting a group in with the same progress, gear and philosophy is about the best you can hope for. The trial phase will allow us and them to see what we are getting into and ultimately if it doesn't work we have only lost two weeks and can then look at other realistic options left which will probably be 10s at that point. (forum post, January 2012)

The notion of 'combining our raiders'—reforming the group—into a new formation that could 'push raiding' through to complete the raiding content was viewed as the 'best one for us at the current time', despite the earlier concern from the members of the group about the risk of mergers to a guild.

Thus the two-week trial proceeded and within a few days the combined trial effort had killed the 3rd boss in the new raid content and had killed the subsequent two bosses four days later (both on the same night, no less). Shortly thereafter, the merged guilds managed to kill the sixth boss in the new raid instance, bringing them to 6/8 and a ranking of 414th in the world. Whether this was the result in a successful merger or just the benefit of added numbers to a lower pool of available raiders was still unresolved, but the evidence of having moved from a world ranking of 794th at the outset of the trial merger to 414th did not go unnoticed. As a result, the guild voted to offer raider spots to 7 of the members from the guild Heresy, thus assimilating their members into the bigger membership. As Celeus explained in a post:

> After the success of the joint raids we have decided that at this moment … to combine the two roster under the Bridgeburners name.
>
> The plan is that the raiding members from Heresy who have been part of the raids during the past four weeks will join BB with a member rank this will happen before Wednesday's raid. (forum post, February 2012)

And while my discussion with Celeus a few weeks later indicated that he felt it was early still to see if the guild's formation would survive its 're-formation' or if

this is merely a 'marriage of convenience'[89] that might not persist. The issues of formation and guild cohesion remained at the forefront of guild discussions. Perhaps Daenon, the original guild leader and founder of Bridgeburners, puts it best:

> I'm hard pressed to call this an actual merger considering Heresy will be subservient to BB in every way and they would only barely make up 30% of the guild. But whatever you call it, this is a good plan considering how tricky this stuff can be. One thing stands out as being especially important though. Like Irisis said, if people don't approach this trial period with an open mind, you basically lose before you begin. If everyone puts their best foot forward, this has the potential to work out amazingly well if these people actually fit well with our guild, while we lose basically nothing if it doesn't. It's a far cry from the crazy merger setup that ended up creating this guild. (Daenon, Bridgeburners, forum discussion post, February 2012)

Formation of a 'subservient' guild through assimilation appears less of a threat to a guild than an 'actual merger'. But it still requires 'an open mind', allowing the members of the guild who had at first been against the idea of a perceived merger to accept its viability.

Thus, the idea of re-formation in guilds, something so prevalent in the raiding community, can be shaped or arranged according to a guild's need and may end up working out 'amazingly well' if the setup is not too 'crazy' as Daenon puts it. This account of the impact of change on guild formation illustrates the complexity inherent in how guilds maintain their formation and how they modify it. For Bridgeburners, their desire to sustain raiding continuity forced them to re-form in a way that could threaten the guild's persistence. This was a guild that was protective of the resilience of its existing formation (the complexity in their recruitment process as outlined on pages 169–174 reinforces this) and had to decide to pursue a merger in a way that still protected its guild's atmosphere. The desire to continue to raid in a familiar social environment (the guild), however, made the guild willing to re-form itself as long it could persist in a way that suited its culture.

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[89] Ventrilo discussion with Celeus, February 2012.

Conclusion

For raiding guilds, a number of specific factors determine guild formation and how it orients itself, from a casual or more serious time commitment, to how it orients its guild atmosphere, to its raiding goals. How that raiding guild identifies these values helps shape its local culture and can contribute to its successful longevity and retention of members. Throughout this chapter I have indicated that while all raiding guilds are formed with the goal of raiding, the specific mechanics of its formation vary at every level of raiding play and specific labels or externally designated categories of raiding guilds can be incomplete or misleading. After all, raiding guilds are made up of individual raiders who share a similar goal and desire to spend time with a large group of other raiders in order to achieve that goal. Perhaps it requires recasting how a raiding guild is categorized by allowing a degree of specification and malleability in relation to concepts like 'hard core' (serious) and 'social' (relaxed) or 'progress time' (intensive time approach) to 'regular schedule' (set time approach), or, finally, 'competitive' progress raiding goals to the more 'casual' progress raiding goals. Even the way we view changes to guild formation could be problematic in that while some might see an influx of new members as a merger, others could view it as a mass recruitment drive.

How a guild forms and arranges itself could shape its culture and impact its resilience in the persistent game environment. This chapter's study into formation in raiding has found that groups are formed in a localized manner, suggesting that each guild structures itself in a way that creates a kind of dynamic relationship between those on the outside and those on the inside. This structure is in place to allow a group to not only sustain its membership and draw in new members but also engage in the action of raiding gameplay.

Formation is the organizing bedrock of the raiding community. It allows for social groupings and the organization and execution of shared gamic goals. While the idea of formation is pervasive, within the scope of formation there are variations

to its practice and perception. One example of this is how raiders perceive the words or concepts of 'social' and 'merger'. I raised both of these concepts in this chapter because they are often used by raiders themselves to describe or delineate a kind of relationship within formation. In both cases of these concepts, some raiders seemed to project a fairly specific relationship with the words either as a form of separation or alienation, such as the 'casual' raider who feels that the more 'hardcore' raiders are 'less social', or as a fear-based anticipation, such as causing a guild's demise by allowing a change to the guild's formation through a 'merger', which is often seen as the 'worst possible thing' a guild can do. What I observed, in the end, however, is that the very idea of a guild being social/sociable is so prevalent and universally invoked by raiders from all types of guilds and all types of progression and structural imperatives (both self-articulated and guild-articulated) as to make it virtually indiscernible from other more varied ideas. This is to say that while not all raiding guilds will self-articulate as 'progression-oriented', the vast majority will refer to themselves as social in some form or other. And in the case of the 'merger' concept, for many raiders, the fear-based anticipation is often related to past experiences with guild membership and often results in any attempt to recruit new members from any other guild to be viewed with suspicion and fear, mostly because the potential disruption to the pre-existing formation can seem too perilous to risk, even if it means the guild will no longer be 'healthy'. But as was seen by the case study involving Bridgeburners' recent addition of new members from another raiding guild, the merger was never really a merger, more a mass recruitment of raiders from another guild into the already-existing guild with the same ethos, values and goals set in place.

I would like to consider these ideas of formation through the lens of subcultural (and to a related extent post-subcultural) studies, primarily as a way to situate how raiders form, arrange and even identify themselves for the purposes of gamic action. I will also indicate where this chapter's findings contribute to the broader work on subcultures by considering how they can inform the nature of identity and group formation and the dynamics of membership (and belonging). I posit that while raiders, and their guilds, represent a subculture focused on pursuing a specific type of gamic action—namely raiding in MMOs—they also create a

specifically localized subculture that is fluid in scope, in that each raiding guild organizes itself for itself with, often, little concern over the ways in which other raiding guilds function or are structured. The guild itself becomes a kind of focal point for the community.

The following example illustrates how the identity for a raider might be more related to the guild they belong to than the action of raiding itself. To illustrate how identity and formation (through membership in guilds) in raiding are often linked, I point to a recent event that transpired in the aftermath of my research work. In September 2012 the guild Paragon (as highlighted throughout this thesis, including this chapter) opted to change its raiding structure from 25-player down to 10-player[90]. This was for pragmatic reasons, they explained, to ensure they could continue raiding despite their reduced membership and difficulty of its members to meet the demanding raiding schedule during progression raiding periods. They felt they had to adapt their structure in a way that still served their overall values and goals (to be a Finnish raiding guild and top the world rankings) while being able to keep raiding. This meant that some of their members were benched and would subsequently miss out on the chance to participate in the raiding race. For one particular now-former raider with Paragon[91], this sudden change has led to what he terms an 'existential crisis'. He was now finding it hard to know how to adjust from having been a core member of a world top ranked raiding guild to now feeling as though he was a nobody with 'nothing to do'.

For this player, identity as a raider was indelibly linked to his local experience with this particular guild. When I asked him if he would consider joining another group just to keep raiding, his response was negative. He either viewed other guilds as mediocre or was dubious about joining better quality guilds because he didn't know anyone there. So if the notion of subculture does work on a larger

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[90] http://www.paragon.fi/news/paragon-will-be-switching-25man-10man-mop. Last accessed November 14, 2012.

[91] I have withheld his name in this instance. Personal discussion over IRC in September and November 2012.

scale (that of the raiding community) then it should also be considered as something which disperses and, possibly, intensifies into that very localized, specific level (that of the guild itself). If this illustration can be regarded as indicative of the way that formation in raiding works on localized levels, then the idea of raiders in the subculture becomes a more fluid concept. Raiders do not remain in the raiding community for raiding alone, perhaps, but more for the formations they associate with. Perhaps in this regard I am echoing Gelder's (2005: 8) enunciation of the nature of subcultures, that they are 'not discrete entities; they are always in the process of acting upon, and being acted on in the turn by, the world around them.'

Subcultural studies have often focused on the *otherness* or *particular social-ness* of a group or community being studied (Gelder, 2005). The seeming peculiarity— or as Ken Gelder puts it, 'non-normative and/or marginal' (2005: 1) nature—in interest or practice of these groups has led to a great deal of consideration and rumination among academic scholars (from multiple disciplines) about both the nature and meaning of such groupings and their implications for identity and culture on a wider scale. Some have called them subcultures, some tribes (Maffesoli, 1996), others communities; however they are named, there has been an inclination to set these groupings apart, to frame them in both definition and distinction. Much of the earliest work focused around issues of style (Hebdige, 1979); youth (Marsh *et al,* 1978; Willis, 1978; Hebdige, 1983); deviant or anti-establishment communities (Fyvel, 1963; Healy, 1996); and, to some extent, place (Thrasher, 1927; Goffman, 1961; Borden, 2001). Subcultures were often associated with a product or appearance or seen as being enacted through an event or series of events in time and place: the club goer (Thornton, 1995; Malbon, 2001), the graffiti artist (Macdonald, 2001) the young male (Willis, 1978, 1990) or the tattoo enthusiast (Atkinson, 2003), as examples. Subculture can be framed by place, interest or appearance (many are distinguishable in this regard), but also through a kind of formation or collected action/behaviour of individuals. Subcultures have also been defined through their identification from the outside rather than by those who may practice it and had often, particularly in the earliest studies into subcultures, been expressed as an expression of resistance to mainstream (Gelder,

2005). My research has identified that the nature of groupings (or subcultures) in raiding are more oriented toward practice as a means of distinction than anything else.

My research has found that raiders prioritise the formation of their social orientation and activity in a particular and distinctive way, all structured with the goal of sustained raiding in mind. And while the activity of individuals drawn together for raiding could be paralleled with, say, individuals drawn together for the activity of dancing, there is also the issue of *where* and at *what level* these particular types of groups are drawn together and act. In the case of Cressey's work (1932) in the 1930s about what he termed the 'taxi-dancer' (35) in dance halls in cities across the United States, a consideration of this particular community and its activity seemed localized (at least in his portrayal) to the venue where the dancing activity takes place. Whereas in the more recent portrayal of the Rheingold's (1993) *virtual community* is more about the 'new kind of culture' (519) formed by people from different locations, people who Rheingold had never actually met face-to-face. What binds this community, Rheingold seems to suggest, is the idea of connectedness and action through the available technologies that enable online/*virtualness* and some sort of ongoing connectedness. This blurs those lines of location and background. This idea of knowing each other yet not physically being with each other is very much how these newer, globalized and online subcultures have been seen (Roberts, 2004) to transform place or transcend appearance. The definition and association of the raiding subculture appears framed more by the arrangement of values and specifics aimed at organizing action rather than other defining factors that may create another subculture. In the case of raiding as subculture, there is more of an affinity with the example of subcultures that are oriented toward an action of production as compared to particular types of subcultures oriented toward activity more than appearance. As a subculture defined by its production of action, raiding transcends the idea of *virtualness* and *community* alone and contributes further to the consideration of the ways in which action can also shape and define an *online* subculture.

The findings in this chapter speak to the significance of the role of guild formation in raiding. For players in the raiding community, being able to raid is not as critical as the guilds to which they belong. For the recently benched raider, his own identity as a raider and member of the community was now in question From the lens of subculture, raiding becomes a raider's active element, while the guild is raiding's binding structure, both distinguishing and framing it. Take a skateboarding subculture as a comparative example; their active element might be the skateboard, while their binding structure might be the skateboard park where they skate. And while there can be parallels drawn between the ways in which raiders set themselves apart from other types of gamers, this is more about the types of action they pursue and not so much about the appearance or wider sense of identity away from the persistent game environment. Unlike many so-called youth-oriented subcultures (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004), there may be no physically discernible features that single out a raider (unlike a tattoo enthusiast, for example). It is the 'located and subcultural space' of raiding (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004: 13) that seems to most readily locate it in the persistent game environment, a space that is explored in more depth in the following chapter.

Above all, a study of raiding formation contributes to research into subcultures by producing an additional perspective into the ways in which a grouping of individuals with a shared goal might appear when there is no physical space to define or frame them. Other research into subcultures online has often focused on how the online environment has either supported or propagated a shared interest or concept (in the conventional world) such as music or a TV programme (Hodkinson, 2002), while there has been less concentration on subcultures that have emerged entirely as a result of an online practice, such as raiding in a persistent game environment. Considering the ways in which distinctive groups such as these form and sustain their arrangement could allow for a further development of these fluid and ever-globalizing groupings that seem to be indicators of society's ways of hosting 'an extensive range of social practices' (Gelder, 2005: 9).

In the end, formation in raiding functions as an organizing principle that shapes the activities and goals within the raiding subcultural environment and enables the arrangement of the social atmosphere and coordination of gameplay activity that is integral to raiding in the persistent game environment. The following chapter, Chapter 6, will consider action within the framework of raiding; how the very action of raiding, and by relation, its movement and spatiality, helps shape and define raiding and the raider him or herself—this is an important extension from the idea of formation. While group formation functions as the conspicuous and fundamental building block that supports raiding game play, it is the practice of gamic action that defines a player's engagement with raiding itself. It is these practices that the following chapter will focus on, concentrating not only on the ways that action is shaped within the raiding play space but also on interactive relationship that the action of raiding has with formation.

Chapter 6:

Exploring action in the raiding game space

Introduction

So far this thesis has explored the ways in which groups interested in pursuing raiding gameplay engage in formation and to arrange their local structures in support of gameplay in a persistent game environment. What I argued, in this analysis, is that guild formation functions as an *organizing principle* for gamic action and is used by guilds to *define* the parameters of their formation around raiding. A guild's formation is not a diegetically oriented experience alone, one where the game (or machine, to use Galloway's (2006) term) and its narrative solely dictated the raiding experience. It was constructed across an array of concerns that were both grounded in the experience of forming a community intent on persistent group play and one interested in protecting the resilience of that formation. This resulted in a degree of complexity in group play formation through the action of raiding, which directly linked to the related concern of this chapter: the way that raiders engage in gamic action.

There is an oft-cited assertion (indeed, even cited earlier in this thesis) by games theorist Espen Aarseth about gaming: 'Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played' (Aarseth, 2001: 2). This statement suggests a duality inherent in the nature of games and that the player needs to have an *active* relationship with it, a notion that is also carried forward by games theorist, Alexander Galloway, when he writes of the 'bounded utility of the two terms' (2006: 19), play ('process') and games ('object'), evokes Aarseth's idea of gamic engagement when he calls games an 'action-based medium' (2006: 3). As earlier explored in this thesis (and as a flexible framework I have drawn from to study raiding gameplay), Galloway (2006) proposed four moments within the sphere of gamic action, suggesting that action in the game environment has a diversity to it—not only in the ways that a player might actually press buttons or type commands to enable and interact with the game's diegesis, but also in the actions—both by players and technologies alike—that connect and flow (Hine, 2000) through and around the game environment. If one concurs with Aarseth's assertion and Galloway's reinforcement, then it stands to reason that the experience of raiding is best explored and understood within the context of action and from an active perspective. As a result, this chapter focuses on the *action* of raiding drawing from Galloway's four moments of gamic action, most particularly the ways in which we move through and perform within the raiding game space of *WoW*. It answers the question: how does gamic action take place in raiding and in what ways does it impact, enable and shape gameplay? I will consider action in raiding, paying particular attention to its movement, spatiality and emotive elements. And if gaming as a whole is action-based in scope, then what does that mean when we focus on raiding? What can we learn from action in raiding that might help situate the experience of play through the digital game? By exploring these forms of gamic engagement through the encapsulating nature of action we can discern nuances in play to frame raiding in the persistent game environment.

This chapter considers the action of raiding first through the lens of space, most particularly the ways in which the raider shapes the space of the desk, the gamespace, and those intersecting spaces between. It also looks closely at the

process of raiding itself, to draw out those nuances in gamic action. It links ideas of gamic action and space in raiding to formation in raiding, as explored in the previous chapter. In this chapter I will argue that raiders not only utilize formation as the *organizing principle* of raiding, but also shape their spaces of play and gamic action as the fundamental *principle of engagement* in raiding.

This chapter presents these ideas using a multisensory approach; that is, considering action in raiding from its visual, haptic or aural perspectives as a way to explore its action-based nature. To fully appreciate the active, multisensory relationships that exist within the game environment, this chapter is best presented from a multisensory context. This consideration of the action of raiding using a multisensory approach places raiding within its spatial and active context, at that 'intersecting moment' (Galloway, 2006: 21) where the raider meets the game space.

Navigating the spaces of raiding game play

> It cannot be repeated often enough that the computer is not a medium, but a flexible material technology that will accommodate many very different media. (Aarseth, 2004: 46)

Aarseth makes a compelling suggestion about computers and, furthermore, the games that are played on them: that they are played on a 'flexible' technology that is 'accommodating' in nature. He also suggests a dynamic and active relationship that computers have with the 'many very different media' that they facilitate and with the very spaces that they inhabit. It is this flexibility, I posit, that contributes significantly to the rich complexity in action that you find in a game environment like *WoW*. So does this mean that the space in which we play games is somehow distinctive or novel as compared to other spaces? Or is its usage of the 'flexible material technology' of a computer simply allowing us new ways to enact play and as such is not so much novel as it is just more complex and multiphrenic?

The field of geography has offered a great deal of consideration to the idea of space, movement and time when considering the relationship between the material/immaterial and information and communication technologies (ICTs). In fact, these notions in concert with the digital probably represent geography's most robust contributions to more recent studies into computing and the Internet[92]. In recent years, though in far more limited terms in comparison[93], geography has also begun to turn its attention to the relationships between gaming practices and the spatial, haptic (such as Paterson, 2006; Ash, 2009; 2010a, 2010b) or the affective (Shaw and Warf, 2009). Ash considers these relationships from what he terms teleplasty, meaning technologies that he describes as having a pre-shaping impact on 'the potentials and possibilities for human action, movement and sense' (Ash, 2010b: 415). He also suggests that 'technology itself acts to pre-empt possibilities for sense by shaping the user's "phenomenal field"'. While I consider the idea of the *pre-shaping* of space and movement particularly germane in relation to the console-based game design, I am less certain of the supremacy of technologies' pre-shaping impact on the player in the persistent game environment as might exist in the console-based game. I would suggest this is due to two factors: one, the 'flexibility' of the computer as a technology, and two, the many ways available for the player to pre-shape the 'potentials and possibilities' (Ash, 2010b: 415) of the raiding gameplay experience through a robust series of non-diegetic and diegetic gamic actions (Galloway, 2006).

Lammes, in her consideration of spatial movement in real-time strategy (RTS) games (where, as she notes, that 'mapping and spatial progress are important organizing principles'), observes that the players of these types of games 'themselves create spatial formations, thus generating a particular sense of space and place' (2008: 85). This kind of organizing of space suggests diegetic control by the computer on movement and location in the game, and can work as a framing of the in-game narrative. This is an important observation about the role that space and, even, mapping can have on the relationship a player has with his

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[92] Excellent examples of these contributions include Adams, 1997; Graham, 1998; Crang *et al,* 1999; and Thrift, 2004.

[93] See my review of geography's contributions to studies into the digital game and environments in Chapter 2, pp. 46–48.

or her playing environment, and I certainly concur that such framing does manifest itself in the raiding play space, but this forming of control of the function of space is just more limited in an MMO. While an RTS often enacts a very specified set of movements and actions between warring sides that are usually based in specific locations (either player vs. player or player vs. environment), an MMO such as WoW often involves a more complex relationship between game-led and player-driven and pre-shaping control in its environment due to the complex variation in activities that a player (or groups of players) can engage in. Space and movement in the persistent game environment are not necessarily representative of its 'organizing principles' (Lammes, 2008: 85) (I assert that formation holds that place) but instead are more indicative of the flexible, active relationships and represent the ways in which the raider engages with the game space. The way that space and movement functions (and is shaped) in the persistent game environment is better framed through the idea of action as it is illustrative of the malleability of space in an MMO and the players' pre-shaping control on it.

To illustrate this idea of a predominant flexibility in the persistent game environment when comparing it to the other computer-based games, I would like to look at Valve's game series *Portal* (and its subsequent game, *Portal 2),* where the technology has a more pre-emptive, pre-shaping impact on the game and its narrative—a better example of a computer-based game that illustrates what Ash (2010) refers to as teleplastic technologies in the digital game. The *Portal* (Valve, 2010–2012) series contains a specific narrative and requires the player to follow sequential processes in order to successfully complete the game and its narrative. Players have a first person shooter perspective where they move between rooms and areas of a complex structure in order to follow the storyline and eventually escape from the facility. Very much a puzzle-solving game, the player uses a portal gun to create passageways enabling her to move between obstacles in a specific pattern, thus progressing through the game's narrative. See figure 6.1 below for a screenshot of *Portal 2.*

Figure 6.1. Screenshot of *Portal 2* gameplay. *Source:* Valve, 2011.

While *Portal* allows for some flexibility in spatial navigation, it exerts significant pre-shaped control over gamic action that forces the player through a series of in-game diegetic steps in order to achieve progression. The game does not function along the same lines of malleability that exist in an MMO. It is an excellent example of Ash's notion of how technologies can pre-empt movement in the game space, even in the case of a computer-based game, and it also evokes Bogost's procedural rhetoric (2007). In contrast, while a persistent game environment like WoW does have its degree of pre-shaped control, there is far more room for flexibility or, to echo Galloway's framing category, the 'non-diegetic operator act' (2006: 12) in this moment of gamic action and within this flexible game environment. The player (or raider, to be more specific) engages rather those pre-shaped forms of *game-controlled diegetic* and *non-diegetic* game space while also exhibiting her own significant control over pre-shaping the space of play. The quest lines that a player completes to level up or win a reward in an MMO make an excellent example of the diegetic control that the game exerts over the player (and raider), and the confines of software and hardware, and the scope

of game design (and procedure) dictate forms of non-diegetic control by shaping the game experience for players. But also embedded within the MMO gamic experience is a significant form of control available to the player (or operator, to use Galloway's term) in modifying, adapting or configuring both forms of diegetic and non-diegetic space.

In the following section, I attend to this idea of flexibility through the action of spatial relationships that exist between the player, space, movement, computer and game. After all, it may very well be this malleability of technology that helps frame these embodied experiences (Mallon and Webb, 2006) of play in the persistent game environment. For a perspective relating to the ways in which we might consider notions of space in relation to raiding and the persistent game, I find Thrift's consideration of the online space as 'interlocking spaces of interactivity' (2003: 390) a particularly descriptive and apt one. My intention, in this section, is to explore these interlocking spaces and moments of gamic action within raiding. As a methodological inspiration, I will be utilizing an approach aimed at tracing those 'connections and flows' (Hine, 2000: 64) in the virtual space to look at those relationships, particularly when considering the ways that the player and digital game interacts. After all the experience of the raider at play is broadly expressed across a complex array of human/non-human, diegetic/non-diegetic, progress-related, object-oriented, controlled/adaptable elements—and all inform each other. This idea to trace the experience of play across Thrift's 'interlocking spaces' (2003: 390) of the persistent game space of raiding allows for an exploration of Giddings' assertion that the 'intangible yet real, embodied yet distributed, monstrous, operations of human ... play' (Giddings, 2009: 156) can be understood as real, not merely as abstract or reduced to notions of 'identity' or 'subjectivity'. Meaning that within the framework of the persistent game environment I have discerned a complex and complicated interplay between the many forms and ways that action in the persistent game space takes place. It is shaped and controlled and bleeds across not only the in-game space but also through the many technologies it utilizes.

The raider is guided by the specificity of her space. And that space takes on different forms and function based on the nature and corporeality of the objects, processes and players that she regularly and fluidly interacts with to enable her experience of play. And these all build to impact the ways and means by which this raider inhabits the landscape of play. My aim is to trace this unique experience of the spaces of play, as experienced by the raider in the persistent game environment. I will be looking at what I find are three *overlapping* kinds of diegetic and non-diegetic active space that both impact and create the game raider's play experience: the deskspace, gamespace and interspace. And I will conclude this section by conducting a brief tracer that demonstrates the ways in which these overlapping components shape and define the action of raiding within the gamespace and how it intersects (and exists) (Galloway, 2006) to meet the physical. My goal in tracing gamic action within the raid space is to follow, identify and learn. A trace does not linger, it moves through the system or organism, understanding and identifying its connections and flow. It allows for a nuanced engagement in the overlapping and interacting complexity of the spaces being explored. From a raider's perspective the engagement with the raid space typically commences with the physical space—what I term the *deskspace.* In the following discussion I trace this first type of raiding play-space.

Tracing the deskspace

The *deskspace* may represent the most tangible (at least at first glance) representation of the raider's playing space. From the context of raiding play, I define the deskspace as the encapsulating framework that includes all physical objects aimed at facilitating engagement with the raiding play space. It is represented by *the object, the hardware* and *the tactile* and is often navigated through the elements that the player can directly (and in a haptic manner) interact with—the keyboard, the monitor, the headset—and what he or she can physically manipulate or inhabit.[94] I have opted to trace (and thus identify)

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[94] For ease of identification, I have opted to describe this space as the 'deskspace' as the encapsulating physical space of play, though it's important to point out that raiders do use other objects that perform the function of the 'desk' while not literally being desks. A

relationships and placements within the deskspace through a study of photographed examples by raiders of their deskspaces provided to me by raiders themselves. Four examples are provided blow (figures 6.2a–6.2d) to trace the interacting relationships within the deskspace. A discussion follows.

Figures 6.2a–6.2d. Selected deskspaces of *World of Warcraft* raiders. (All photos used with permission.)
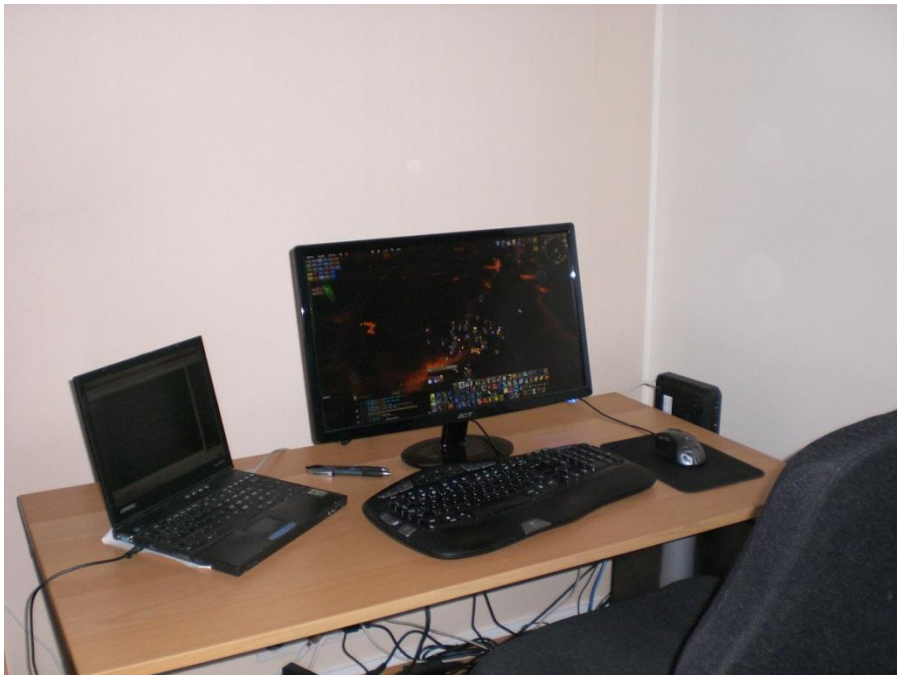
Figure 6.2a. Olog's deskspace, 2011.

laptop tray is a good example of this—a kind of platform on which the physical objects of the play space may be placed and arranged despite it not being, literally, a desk.

Figure 6.2b. Mezzy's deskspace, 2011.

Figure 6.2c. Communal deskspace of Bigjeff (left), Nyathiel (middle, not pictured), and Hoc (right), 2010.

Figure 6.2d. Arad's deskspace, 2011.

These photographed images show a series of physical examples of non-diegetic operator engagements with arranging their physical objects of play. One can capture both presence and absence of the physical on these deskspaces. Take Olog's (figure 6.2a) as an example. Aside from a pen, placed between the laptop and monitor, the deskspace is arranged starkly, limited to those objects aimed at facilitating the raiding gameplay experience: the desktop computer, a monitor, a mouse, keyboard, even a laptop. Situated in a well-lit, yet confined space, the deskspace looks no different than a conventional computer set up for any other usage. The representation of Mezzy's deskspace (figure 6.2b) is in contrast with that of Olog's. Mezzy's deskspace appears cluttered but purposeful, displaying multiple peripheral elements: a headset, mouse, lamp, speakers, keyboard and monitor and yet other things as well—medicine, snacks, water and papers. All seem placed for usage and their arrangement suggests a preference for ease of access while engaged in raiding game play. And yet, while these deskspaces look quite different from each other, they still point to an orientation toward using the deskspace for functionality. Even looking at the communal deskspace (figure 6.2c) suggests a parallelism in essential function across varied spaces of play,

though each player has modified the space to suit his or her active relationship with the *deskspace,* including the inclusion of beverages, lighters, and other peripheral objects the player may want nearby. This suggests that the raider engages with specificity in arranging the deskspace. In fact, the discussion I had with Arad (figure 6.2d) indicates the level of specificity in placement that a raider can engage with. (My emphasis with <u>underlines</u> added.) We began our discussion by my asking him what his hand orientation was (left or right).

> Arad: <u>Right handed, so I leave that space free for my mouse, plenty of space</u>
> <u>needed there</u>. I use clique healing addon, so <u>most of my healing</u>
> <u>targeting/casting is done via the mouse</u>
>
> Ladan: what happens if you don't have enough space?
>
> Arad: <u>Anything in the path might get knocked off the table, but that's about it.</u>
>
> Ladan: So you tend to have a fairly active movement of your right hand and
> forearm while gaming?
>
> Arad: Depends, <u>I use a high sensor mouse with windows assist turned down as far</u>
> <u>as possible.... I've still got a slightly bigger than average mousepad to allow</u>
> <u>for this.</u>
>
> Ladan: Is your first priority to make sure the desk is better set up for
> raiding/gaming?
>
> Arad: Yes.
>
> (Arad, Exploding Labrats, Skype discussion, August 2011)

Arad describes his deskspace in terms of his embodied relationship with it—particularly in relation to raiding—where he needs to ensure his deskspace has 'plenty of space' since 'anything in the path might get knocked off the table' when he operates his mouse while raiding. Indeed, his deskspace is engineered around the action of raiding itself, 'most of my healing/casting is done via the mouse'. This focused specificity around the action of raiding suggests that the desk becomes the encapsulating framework for embodied gamic action with the objects used and manipulated (and adapted to the computer) for the sake of game play action. The hand manipulates the mouse; the objects are positioned to both accommodate gameplay and avoid disruptions to game play flow; the monitor (or monitors) are placed to provide visual access to the game; objects supplemental to gameplay—the water, the snacks, the medicine—are within easy reach. All of these objects and items, along with their positionality, suggest a spatially active relationship at work within the deskspace. Figure 6.3 below is a visual map

suggests the ways in which objects on the deskspace can be enacted and interacted with in relation to raiding game play.
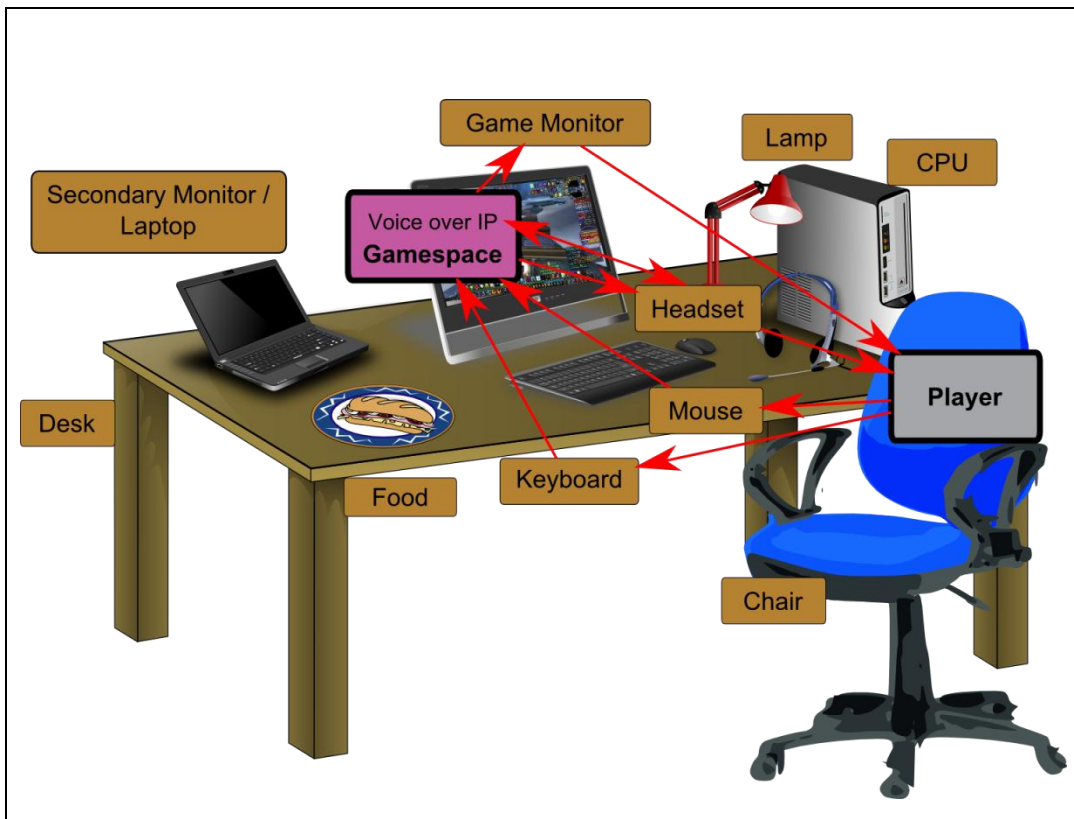
Figure 6.3. Tracing the deskspace.

In the previous figure, I have arranged objects—much like as depicted in the images above (in figures 6.2a–6.2d)—that are indicative of those that can be found on the deskspace and provided as a suggestion of how these objects might relate to each other (through the player) in the space. For example, the hands interact with the mouse and keyboard and, when there, the food or drink on the deskspace. These interactions create a kind of overlapping interplay of movement and action. These relationships are also dynamic and interactive, and, to some extent, reliant on each other. For example, the headset or speakers will not work without their connection through the computer, or the monitor relies on electricity and its connection to the CPU to project images. And as the raider engages with the deskspace, so is he or she linked to the *gamespace,* that space

accessed through the computer where the raiding player can access the game itself and where all game-driven activities take place. This will be explored in the following section.

Tracing the gamespace

And so we move from the raider's deskspace and its physicality into another kind of spatial relationship: the *gamespace.* The deskspace, most notably marked and distinguished by the hardware, or physical object, of the raiding game play experience, directly intersects with the gamespace, made distinctive by its *software, interface* and the *visual and aural* and all of its intersecting relationships that lie therein. Based on observation and my own experiences as a participant raider, I have constructed a map of relationships below (figure 6.4) to consider the ways that the gamespace is enacted and interacts with its components, through this medium of the software and game interface. When I consider my own active navigation of the gamespace while raiding, I can identify certain ways in which I engage with the space. Game software enables my entry to the game and the user interface facilitates my active play. I use addon software and create macros to streamline or enhance my raiding performance and I rely on communication methods, like voice over IP (VOIP) or in-game chat channels, to interact with my fellow raiders. All of these types of actions help shape the gamespace and the ways in which raiders utilize and modify it for their own use.
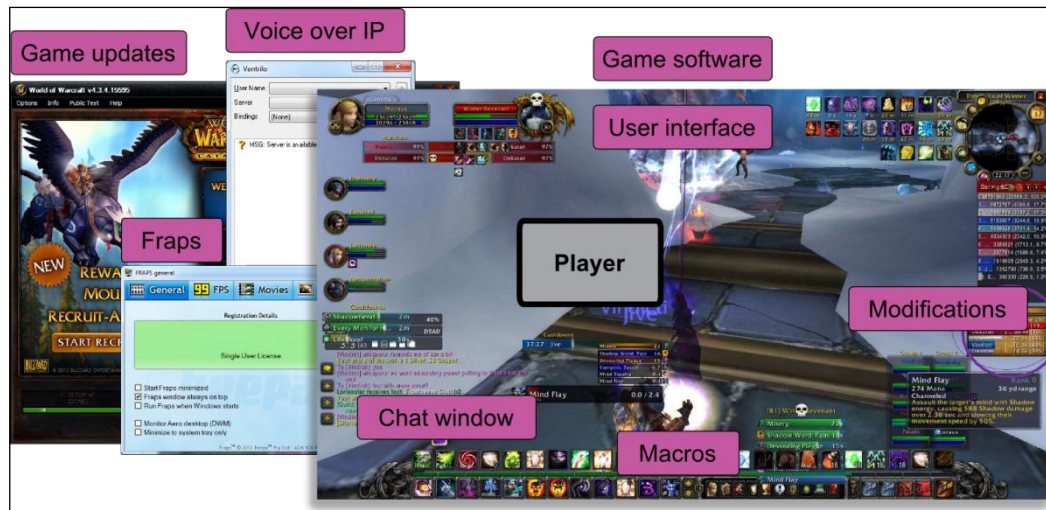
Figure 6.4. Tracing the gamespace.

In this section I will explore this notion of the gamespace by looking at, primarily, the *user interface*—that visual portal through which the gamer both accesses and interacts with the raiding gamespace itself. A significant element of digital game design the interface is referred to by Galloway as, 'a gateway that opens up and allows passage to some place beyond' (2009: 936). It is that 'gateway' toward the diegetic gameplay experience; that visual display of non-diegetic information and operation that permits such a helpful framework from which to study the gamespace in WoW, particularly among raiders. Coupled with the function of the interface is the notion of malleability. The process of modification is a personal one and suggestive of the process by which the raider can exert a kind of control over the gamespace. Each raider has the option, through software, of modifying and pre-shaping their gamespace by being 'awash in information' (Galloway, 2009: 936) through the user interface (UI) itself—to meet their specifications of raiding play. And the design of additional software, called 'add-ons', is a predominant feature of this gamespace, widely used and integrated into raiding gameplay. The placement of added information, the movement or removal of visual game features, the orientation of the chat windows or interactive elements, all of these represent ways in which the *gamespace* is modified to enable, facilitate and support raiding game play. The following comments (my emphasis in underlines has been added) from raiders indicate the mindset and function of add-ons from a raiding game play perspective.

Hentrenson: We can <u>design our own addons</u> and <u>do whatever we want.</u>

> Phailia: We do a lot of bosses differently, and <u>the addon lets us do things differently. It's a huge plus</u>. (Phailia and Hentrenson, Inner Sanctum [EU], 2011)

> DiamondTear: the proper way to <u>set up your UI</u> for it as a healer is to <u>make sure you see the debuff</u> people get when they're under 10k hp

> DiamondTear: but at first <u>I was foolishly looking at their HP</u> instead, so I had to use the blizzard raid frames to see current HP instead of deficit that you see on my grid

> DiamondTear: I feel like that kind of shit is <u>important for raiding at top tier</u> … <u>setting your UI properly that is</u> (Diamondtear, Paragon, IRC interview, January 2011)

As interest in raiding has grown so has the creation of numerous player-designed add-ons or applications that allowed players to modify their game screen and support their raiding performance; in the words of Phailia, 'the addon lets us do things differently'. This ability to do things 'differently' allows for modification and selection when navigating and positioning the gamespace, something Hentrenson describes as permitting himself and his guildmates to 'do whatever we want'. And for Diamondtear, having the right modifications integrated into the interface design is essential for mistake avoidance ('I was foolishly looking at their HP[95] instead') and performance at the 'top tier': the very idea of 'setting your UI properly' is at the core of game play. Additional consideration of priorities relating to a particular role (keeping in mind Diamondtear's comment about the 'proper way' for a healer to set up a UI for a particular fight) also plays a predominant role. Most of these add-ons serve a very practical purpose: their goal is to help gamers improve performance and efficiency while playing. For the majority of raiders, using game add-on software was widely considered essential to be effective during a raid and many raiding guilds made the use of particular

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[95] HP means hit points or health points. This refers to the amount of health that a character will have at a specific level. Injury or attacks can remove HP; a complete loss of HP will result in a character's death. The priority of a healer on the raiding team is to heal, thus ensuring the HP of a character does not drop too low.

add-ons requirement of being in the guild.[96] (Technology in the form of add-ons was also explored in Chapter 5, pp. 184–186.)

As an example, one type of add-on that many raiders consider essential is a 'threat metre'. This addon helps determine who is causing the raid enemy (boss or monster) to target its attack on them and also indicates if the amount of damage that player is causing against the enemy might cause the enemy to target its damage at him or her (certain spells or damaging affects can raise the 'threat level' if they are very powerful or effective). Figure 6.5 below is a screenshot of the Ulterion's game playing screen and illustrates how addons are used during a game raid. In this case, the graphic that is marked with a yellow arrow (see figure 6.5) denotes the location of a 'threat metre' addon in a raider's user interface and as arranged on their game screen. In a zoomed in example (see figure 6.6), the top red line indicates the amount of aggression the foe(s) are targeting on the raiders, the red line below it denotes the threat that the raid tank is generating (the higher the better, as that means the raid foe(s) has focused its attack on the raider who can best handle the attack), and the white line is the threat generated by a member of the team (lower than the tank). If the non-tanking raiders create more threat than the tank then they can draw the attack of the raid foe, which can have negative consequences for both the player it turns its attention to and the rest of the raid. It is not unusual for the player leading the raid to be stressing to the non-tanking players over voice over-IP technology (like Ventrilo or TeamSpeak) to 'manage your threat' or to criticise a non-tanking player for causing a 'wipe' (a wipe is when all players in the raid die in quick succession) due to their lack of control over the gamic processes. In this case, add-ons exemplify the ways in which the non-diegetic (not specifically related to the narrative of the

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[96] Even in my own discussions with specific raiders (Olog, Mezzy and Kruf, for example) for my research, I learned that these raiders had begun to create add-ons for their own use, the use of their guild, or for wider usage. Mezzy, for example, had designed a class-specific add-on (for hunters) to help during a particular boss fight. In the case of Olog, for example, his creation of an add-on to display locational information on the gamespace, an augmented virtual reality add-on called AVR, was widely used (over 150,000 downloads on one host site alone) until being disabled by game designers in 2010. This kind of widespread usage of some add-ons, indicates the significant ways in which raiders engage with the idea and experience of modification. (Wow Ace, http://www.wowace.com/addons/avr/. Last accessed November 24, 2012.)

game) and diegetic forms of gamic action are enacted both simultaneously and interactively through the process of raiding gameplay.

Figure 6.5. Example of an add-on in use (the 'threat metre') during a game raid, marked by the yellow arrow (shown at the far right of the UI). *Source:* Ulterion., 2009. Used with permission.

Figure 6.6. Zoomed in example of a threat metre in use during combat. *Source:* Author, 2009.

The following four examples of user interfaces, both the unmodified (figure 6.7a) and the modified (figures 6.7b–d), are included below for the purposes of visual analysis and discovery of the ways and means by which we modify our gamespace

for raiding play. I'd like to mention here that while these examples are by no means a comprehensive sample of the widespread ways in which players might modify their UI space[97], they are representative of the ways in which we can utilize additional software and other forms of the *gamespace* to enable and enact the raiding gameplay experience. And while these examples also do not represent the sheer scale of UI modifications that are made, they are representative of the varied aesthetic approaches (as Galloway puts it, a representation of the romanticism that now exists in 'today's play' [2009: 934] to non-diegetic gamespace modification).

Figure 6.7a. A screenshot of an unmodified game user interface (Waasa [the author's]). *Source:* Author's UI. 2012.

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[97] For an appreciation of the widespread engagement in not only modifying one's UI (user interface) but also of displaying and discussing this modification for other players to see, one need only turn to MMO-Champion, an online Web site-based community dedicated to MMO players and gameplay. On their lively and very active discussion forums dedicated to WoW is a specific discussion thread named 'Post Your UI' in the 'Interface & Macros' section. Since 2009 (though the moderator of this thread notes that 'the old thread somehow disappeared', suggesting that this thread was actually started far earlier and had likely included many more examples), over 5,500 UI screenshots have been posted (though this number is most likely higher since players typically post more than one example of their UI, such as one shot displaying how their UI looks when they are playing in a combat situation and one exemplifying when not), with over 1.3 million views of this particular thread over the three year period. (MMO-Champion, 2012)

In Figure 6.7a, we see an unmodified UI. This example shows a large visual display depicting the navigable play space of the game, with the character displayed in the middle, with her name floating above her small body. The button bar, with its interactive functionality, appears at the bottom of the interface. The button bar represents a clear example of where the *deskspace* (the hands on the keyboard or mouse) intersects with the *gamespace.*

Figure 6.7b. A screenshot of Mezzy's modified game user interface. *Source:* Mezzy, 2011. Used with permission.

Figure 6.7b represents an evolution beyond the most basic UI (Figure 6.6a) where it shows a UI that has been only modified to include additional key information, in this case the use of an addon called 'grid' which displays (in the colourful patchwork on the upper left corner of the screen, identifying the different classes and players in the raid group). The activity of the *gamespace* is well captured in this UI screenshot. The middle of the screen depicts the action of combat, with messaging of healing and damage done appearing to transpose over the activity of the gamespace itself.

Figure 6.7c. A screenshot of Atheenya's modified game user interface. *Source:* Atheenya, 2009. Used with permission.

In Atheenya's UI (figure 6.7c), certain features are similar to the previous figure (6.7b), though the positionality has changed. A screen with accessibility located toward the lower parts of the screen suggests a purposefulness in location, as Atheenya notes in her own rationale for her UI's design:

> I like it <u>simple, plain and with small stuff/warnings</u>. And tbh, I do like it <u>cute and clean</u> but I am a girl after all... I ... have <u>a very precise and informative-efficient UI</u>. ... But I believe this last update of my UI has a <u>improved a bit my performance</u> cause I am able to track my HoT's and my CD's a lot better than I used. <u>I may not be a better healer, but makes healing less stressful.</u> (Atheenya, Chi, forum post, November 2009)

In her own words, Atheenya notes her preference for the 'simple' and 'plain', seeming to suggest that a sparser arrangement of the gamespace suits her playing style, although she chooses to clarify her reasoning from a gendered position, 'I am a girl after all'. For Atheenya, her priority in UI design seems related to not only this 'clean' arrangement, but also so it can enable her desire to be 'precise

and informative-efficient' which she relates to improving her performance and making her 'healing less stressful'. It seems as though the notion of UI modification plays two significant functions: modification for the sake of performance and modification for the sake of appearance. This is well expressed by Rasiel below. He posted both his UI followed by a description of the complexity and variety of addons utilized to set up his deskspace (see figure 6.7d below).

Figure 6.7d. Rasiel's modified user interface. *Source:* Rasiel, 2009. Used with permission.

So it´s time for me to post my long list of addons. <u>I must say i'm quite addicted to changing my UI,</u> and <u>most of my addons are all about making me feel good about ' how the game looks like'</u>

The pretty ones:
-X-Perl Unit frames
-Btex
-Bartender
-Button Facade (makes buttons smaller)
-Sexy Map
-Bagnon
-Cartographer
-Elkano Buff Bars
-Prat (replaces original chat)

Now, the useful addons:
-Deadly boss mod
-Omen
-Ora2
-Forte Xcorsist (shows a bar with all my cooldowns, very configurable)
-Gatherer
-MikScrollingbatletext (Lots of useful info in combat)

-Grid
-Quartz (replaces cast
bar)
-CCbreaker (makes an
annoying sound when I
miss any cast or

someone breaks my cc)
-OmniCC (adds the
remaining seconds of
my DOTs inside the cast
buttons)
-Titan Panel

(Rasiel, Chi, forum post, November 2009)

Here Rasiel lists, in painstaking detail, the number and complexity of addons utilized to create his UI (figure 6.7d). A cursory glance indicates that Rasiel has 20 addons installed, half for the purpose of making his UI 'pretty' and the rest to be 'useful'. He describes his approach to changing his UI design as 'quite addicted' but also explains that the motivating factor behind his detailed approach to UI modification as being related to 'making' him 'feel good' about the aesthetic appearance of the game itself. Note the twin dragons on the lower panel display—their appearance has no usability, they point directly to Rasiel's desire for a visual display that makes him feel good. This, again, suggests that the modification to the gamespace is about being both 'pretty' and 'useful', thus suggesting an orientation toward the *aesthetic usability* of the play space. Yes, it's an active space (as the gamespace indicates with the image of Rasiel's character engaged in combat), but that space is customized to meet aesthetic as well as gamically diegetic needs. When comparing figure 6.7d (Rasiel's) to figure 6.7a (the author's unmodified UI), there's a striking difference: while the diegetically controlled space of the game still predominates the screen, the periphery has transformed. While the unmodified screen displays a functional button at the bottom of the screen, the modified UI includes layers of buttons and 'informative-efficient' displays, as Atheenya puts it. Even the character's name info bar has been relocated to a lower part of the screen (unlike the upper left-hand corner as in the original display).

Figure 6.7e. Varil's modified user interface. *Source:* Varil, 2009.

Figure 6.7f. An example of Awardruid's modified user interface. *Source:* Awardruid, n.d.

Figures 6.7a–6.7f. Examples of modified WoW game user interfaces.

As a reinforcement of the idea of the individual experiences of the 'informative-efficient' and aesthetic being seen as a subjective one and in those cases where reflecting Galloway's earlier assertion ('the nondiegetic portion of the interface is as important if not more so than the diegetic portion' [2009: 945]) asserts the importance of the role of the non-diegetic in raiding play, as in the case of the final two examples, a close visual study of figure 6.7e suggests that Varil has a preference for information over a clearer display of the action-oriented part of the gamespace, the *gameview* (or diegetic view), although a great deal of messaging on the screen is linked to the action of raiding. Another notable feature of this UI is that many representations of the same information being provided in different formats on the UI. It's almost as though the player does not want to miss any key information and so has manipulated his gamespace to accommodate that expectation, even if it appears that he has sacrificed his visual display for the sake of this information, in comparison to the earlier figures. This idea of the sacrifice of the gameview for the sake of being 'awash in information' (Galloway, 2006: 936) seems no better demonstrated than by looking at Awardruid's UI (see figure 6.7f). Redundancy in information (that colourful patchwork display [called a 'grid' and also noted on Atheenya's UI in figure 6.7c] of character names and classes in the group is placed three identical yet different ways on the screen) crowds the UI, providing what seems more reminiscent of the cockpit of an airplane (*see* figure 6.8) than a game display. What is also notable about Awardruid's UI is his perspective. While the other UIs show a 3rd person visual perspective (with the character usually positioned in the middle of the UI and the player able to see the game from behind it), Awardruid's shows a bird's eye view perspective, meaning that the visual perspective is from above the characters. This allows for a specific view of what is happening in closer proximity to the character in preference for what might be happening further afield.

Figure 6.8. Cockpit of a 747-boeing aircraft.

Overall, these varied UIs do suggest an active relationship between the idea of specificity within the context of two parallel motivations: those of function and form. This specificity is expressed through how the raider instils intentionality into his or her gamespace. The raider wants their modified UI to be 'useful' (Rasiel) but they also want it to be 'clean and cute' (Atheenya). And the desire for information seems paramount. Perhaps this idea is well carried through by Galloway's consideration of the interface when he highlights that how we view the interface may need transforming to a newer sensibility:

> It is no longer a question of a 'window' interface between this side of the screen and that side … but an intraface between the heads-up-display, the text and icons in the foreground, and the 3D, volumetric, diegetic space of the game itself—on the one side, writing; on the other, image. What else flows from this? (Galloway, 2009: 946)

Galloway calls the interface an 'intraface', suggesting that the way that it functions—calling on the many media that enable and support its usage—is more of an all-encompassing object than an idea of the 'this side… and that side'. Thus, exploring the relationships between these many elements of the gamespace allows a way to understand the complex and interlocking ways that space is used, modified and adapted in relation to the raiding gameplay experience. This idea of active engagement with the spatial relationships across the raiding play space,

having now been explored in the earlier section through the deskspace and now through the gamespace, will be considered through the spaces that work through and around the gamespace and deskspace: the interspace.

Tracing the interspace

The *interspace,* defined as 'the spaces between things' (OED, 2012), is the spatial relationship I'd like to explore in this final section. For me, in my consideration of these active relationships across the raiding spaces of play, looking at only the deskspace and gamespace limits the way that space is used in raiding. After all, if the deskspace related to all of those tangible material objects (hardware) that a raider interacts with and positions for their raiding game play, and if the gamespace relates to those non-material elements (software) that enact the action of gameplay itself, then what of those elements that are significant to the action of raiding game play yet may not fall under the literal activity of the gamespace or the material objects of play. The action of raiding play itself incorporates an additional kind of space, the interspace, and it happens between and through other types of space within the game, such as the gamespace and deskspace.
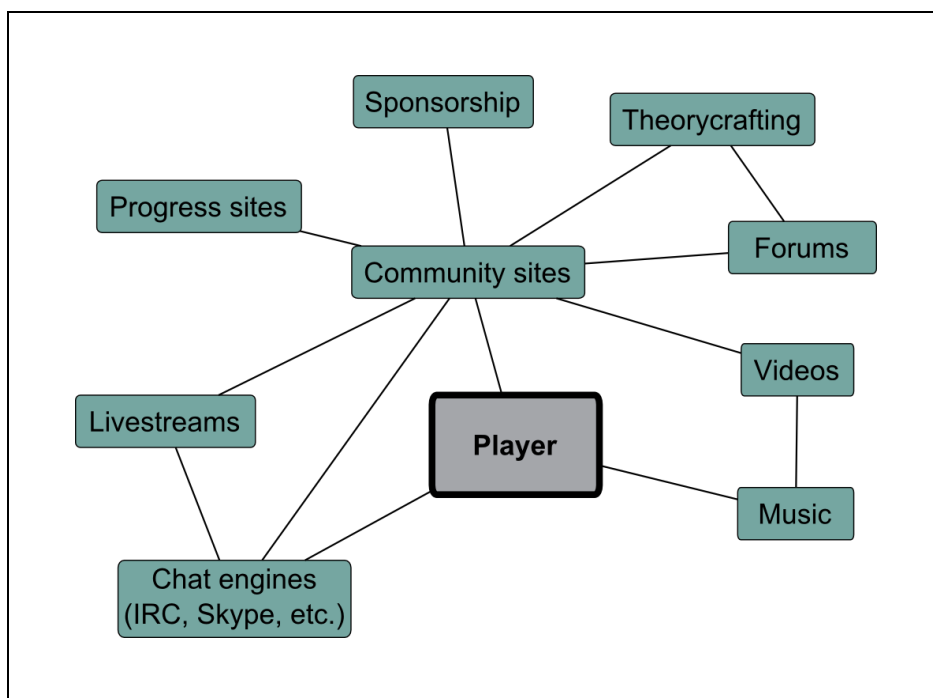

Figure 6.9. Tracing the interspace.

From a strictly descriptive approach, the interspace could be viewed as those active elements that appear within the space of raiding gameplay that are seen as integral yet supplemental to the experience yet may not exist—formally or fully—within the realm of the deskspace or the gamespace. As an example, consider the ways that raiders describe these supplemental interstitial elements (as depicted in figure 6.9) as being integral to their gameplay performance and experience:

> I spend considerable time <u>theorycrafting</u>…. (Kruf, Paragon, IRC interview, January 2011)

> I <u>read up on encounters</u> and familiarize myself with them. I read up on my class on <u>various websites</u>…. I decided to check this morning and<u> consult some forums.</u> (Thifyx, Bridgeburners, guild site text interview, March 2011)

The raiders above directly reference their own predilection for this interspace, or these supplemental elements that connect raiding gameplay and fill any gaps in between. Indeed, part of preparing for the action of raiding is engaging with the wider resources that reside around the gamespace, such as reading up on 'forums', 'theorycrafting' and looking at various 'websites'. The following also represent ways in which other forms of the interspace are enacted by the raiding community.

Figure 6.10. Example of a raiding community site (Manaflask) with its livestream viewing area.

Figure 6.10 is an example of the interspace of raiding game play, a place where the idea of engagement with the game itself and means of observing or participating in it can often occur along the periphery; meaning that while players often engage and arrange this kind of interspace into their playing experience, it is not a formal part of the gameplay experience. In the case of manaflask.com, a community Web site geared toward gaming with a particular focus on high-end raiding and player vs. player gaming, the provision of livestreams is becoming a 'natural part' of the 'online gaming world'. For the broadcaster of these livestreams, their engagement with the gamespace and, to a lesser extent, the deskspace is both evident and on display. In a corner of the screen (see videos 6.1 and 6.2) the broadcaster is displayed, showing himself commentating his own active gameplay. For the viewer their engagement is different. Their passive observation of another's gameplay experience is distinctive of the peripheral experiences of play and indicative of the types of interspace one observes through the raiding gameplay space.

Video 6.1. Video example of a livestream with Affinitii (Blood Legion, 2012). *Source:* Affinitii.
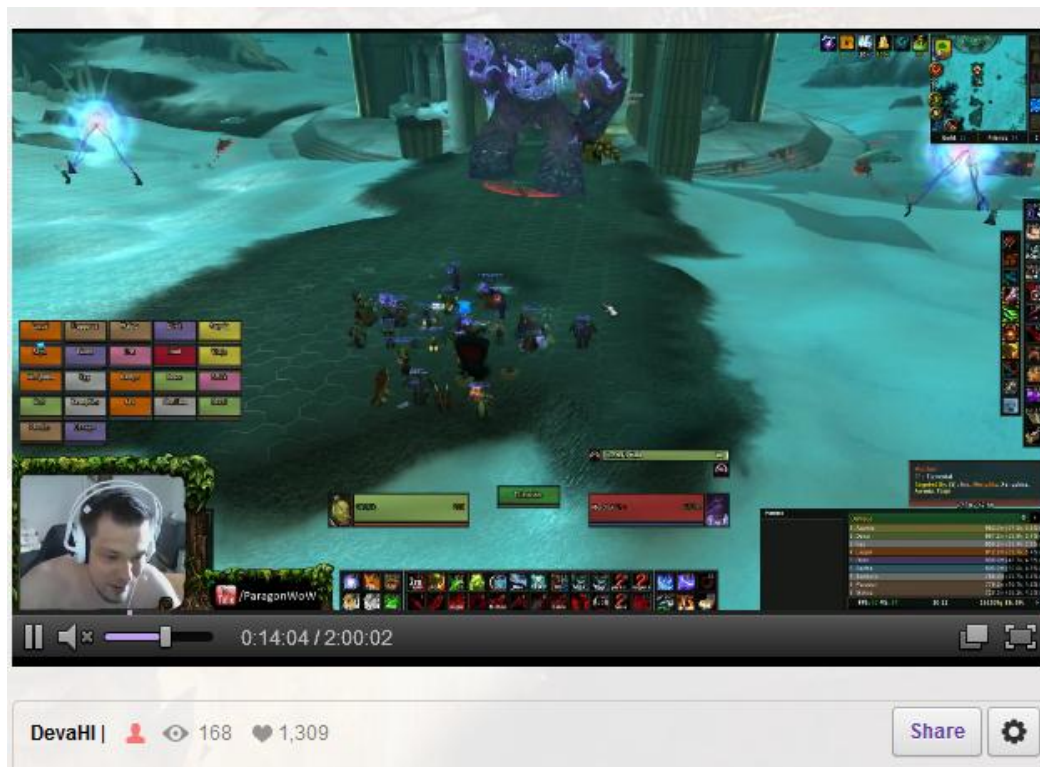
Video 6.2. Video example of a livestream with Devai (Paragon, 2012). *Source:* Devai.

Tracing the ways in which the hardware (deskspace), software (gamespace), and peripheral spaces between (interspace) interact and overlap with each other, allows for an exploration of the dynamic ways in which the active relationships in the spaces of raiding play are enacted. By considering the traced map of relationships in figure 6.11 below (and while reconsidering the photographed deskspace [with the gamespace displayed on the computer monitor] below), one can appreciate those 'intersecting spaces' of interaction where these spatial relationships are enacted.
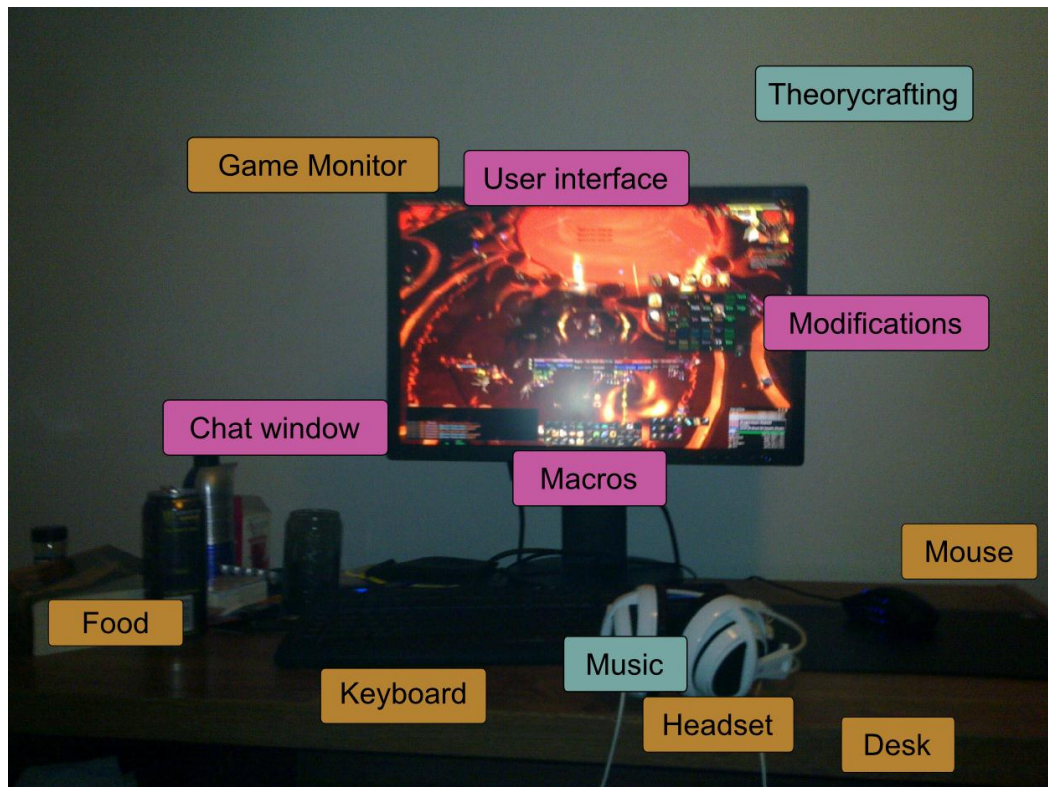
Figure 6.11. Tracing the relationships within the raiding play space.

Galloway's own consideration of the interface in WoW offers a compelling way to consider these intersecting forms of gamic space of an MMO, particularly in relation to its moments of gamic action:

> ... where is the diegetic space? It is the cave backdrop, the deep volumetric mode of representation that comes directly out of Renaissance perspective techniques in painting. Alternately, where is the nondiegetic space? It is the thin, two-dimensional overlay containing icons, text, progress bars, and numbers. It deploys an entirely different mode of signification, reliant more on letter and number, iconographic images rather than realistic representational images. (2009: 945)

This echoes my own perception (and actual use) of the gamespace (and its UI) and provides a helpful way to think through overlapping experiences of non-diegetic and diegetic gamic action so typical in the raiding experience—one where the arrangement (or formation) of play is as important as the way in which raiders play (action). As Galloway notes, 'Even someone unfamiliar with the game will notice that the nondiegetic portion of the interface is as important if not more so than the diegetic portion' (2009: 946). So even with the gamespace one could put forth the idea that there are many layers of gamic action and that once

one expands it to consider the hardware (deskspace), software (gamespace) and those overlapping spaces between (interspace), it can help draw out the ways that space is both *acted on* and *acts on* those who navigate the persistent game environment. Thus the notion of the overlapping and intersecting relationships between the deskspace, gamespace and interspace becomes an important form of gamic engagement by raiders. In the following section, the idea of these active relationships in the raiding play space will be explored in greater depth by tracing the actual action of raiding through the narrative of the raid space itself.

Exploring action in raiding

This chapter has so far explored the shaping of gamic action through the raiding gamespace's hardware, software and those spaces between. But the raider's gamespace is not merely represented by the space that she arranges and accesses—it is also represented through the actions that she performs within it. By considering the ways in which gamic action functions within the raiding gamespace, I posit that both a game's formal elements—those that are most easily associated with the gamic experience—and its pre-shaped, gamer-modified elements function together in complex and overlapping way to perpetuate raiding. In this sense, action becomes the core element of raiding. This idea of the overlapping, complex nature of the raiding play environment is best represented through closely tracing its most diegetically framed gamic experience: the raid. And as the experience of raiding is primarily defined by the gamic action of the group, it relates directly to those notions of specificity within the formation of the raiding guild explored in Chapter 5.

This section is primarily concerned with the ways in which movement and action function to shape the gamic space of both the raider and the group. As the previous section was interested in considering the relationships within the space of raiding game play, so this section is interested in tracing the engagement in action-based elements of the experience of raiding itself—the actual active narrative of play within the raiding space. By considering action through this

particular lens, an argument for the particular ways that raiders act within the space of play can be further developed. Finally, when connecting these ideas of space and action in raiding back to the ideas of formation, as explored in the previous chapter, I argue that raiders create (and pre-determine) not only the ways in which they *form and arrange* themselves and their groups (through formation), but also how groups *shape* their gameplay and *act* within the *gamespace* itself (through action). These both, formation and action, represent the core characteristics of raiding. And these expressions of action as the fundamental engagement of raiders are at once varied yet focused and complex yet localized to this specific form of play.

To best support my position about these complex and overlapping ways that gamic action is expressed in raiding and as a representation of action as the principle of engagement in raiding, I present the following section which follows raiders through the raid space, providing examples in the form of video, audio and even textual material of raiders' actions while participating in raid activity.[98] Interspersed between these descriptive and multisensory examples are discussion points that draw out and analyse those significant moments of gamic action as they occur within raiding. While the primary function of a raid, from both the player and game environment perspective, is to engage in diegetically based combat with game-designed foes, other non-diegetic activities also take place in a raid that capture and magnify the nature of this group activity. An example of diegetic control of a raid instance by the game itself (the machine) is the entrance to the raid instance: these areas have a mechanic in place meaning that players have to meet certain minimum level requirements to enter. For example, a level-70 raiding instance cannot be entered by players at level 69 or lower. And an example of non-diegetic gamic action would be those instances when the raider has arranged his deskspace or configured how he executes gamic action during raiding. I will draw out a number of gamic actions within raiding from this trace through the raiding environment for the purposes of discussion to highlight the

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[98] All of the video footage included in this section were captured by raiders from two different raiding guilds, DREAM Paragon and Bridgeburners, in March 2011.

distinctive complexity inherent in the action of raiding. Figures 6.12–6.14 display the game maps of this raid instance.

Figure 6.12. Map of Bastion of Twilight, section 1. The Entrance (south of Bastion Antechamber) to the Twilight Enclave with the bosses Halfus Wyrmbreaker and the twin dragon bosses Theralion and Valiona. Skulls denote locations of raid bosses. *Source:* Blizzard, 2011.

Figure 6.13. Map of Bastion of Twilight, section 2. Sanctum of the Ascended to Throne of the Apocalypse, housing both the Ascendant Council and Cho'gall bosses. *Source:* Blizzard, 2011.

Figure 6.14. Map of Bastion of Twilight, section 3. The Twilight Caverns, with the boss Sinestra. *Source:* Blizzard, 2011.

The raid instance covered in the following section is called *Bastion of Twilight, BoT*. Raiders will often use the abbreviated terms for raids and other places in WoW. BoT is one of the newer raiding instances, an area that only level 85 playerscan enter. BoT can be navigated by a 10-person group or a 25-person group. The geography of a raid instance (as seen in the preceding figures, figures 6.10–6.12) follows a purposeful route. Players can endeavour to avoid specific game content, but it's not always feasible. In many instances, players have to 'clear' or kill the enemies that patrol the halls and walkways in order to reach a game boss. While some raid instances may have only 1 or 2 bosses, BoT typifies the larger raid instances with multiple bosses, five in this case. The sixth boss, Sinestra, only becomes available to raiders once they have successfully killed all of the previous bosses in the raid instance on the heroic difficulty level (a level that's designed to be even more complicated and challenging than the already challenging 'normal' level).

The best place to start my exploration of the gamic action in raiding is by considering the *purposefulness of the raiding instance*—the design of gamic space as raiding space. The raiding instance exists for no other reason than to provide a group with raiding content to engage with. This is a good example of Lammes' (2008) suggestion about the organizing nature of space in an MMO. A raiding instance is mapped out with its own form of purposefulness. Raiders navigate the space along this 'purposeful route', typically moving through the map from one boss encounter to the next. And while there is always the possibility of circumventing one area to get to another region ahead, the map will never change and the location of the mobs and bosses within the raiding instance will always be in the same locations. This provides a framework of specific space that a raiding group will always have to move through and an example of a diegetic machine act, where the 'material aspects of the game environment reside' (Galloway, 2006: 12) and the game controls the access of the player. By its very construction as an 'instance' or removed space, the raiding environment becomes a controlled, intentional space of group-oriented gamic action; and this has been provided by the game for the group to engage in. The transition of the raider from the normal space to the raiding space also becomes an important indicator of gamic action in raiding, as shown in the following.

Video 6.3. Video footage depicting flying toward the raid instance. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLYD666Q4cA. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[**see Video 6.3**]A lone raider flies on his mount toward the raid instance, in this case an entrance which is located high above the earth below on a

floating platform. A swirling mass on the platform indicates the gate, a transition from the 'normal' game area into the raid instance. The gate is a warning and an alert: entering this space will take you away from the game environment to the constructed environment best navigated by a group. The disembodied skull in front of the gate indicates the difficulty level of the raid area—this being the highest difficulty level available for this particular level: heroic. A few game-designed functions exist to ensure that only the right kind of raider is able to enter this dangerous area: she must be in a designated raiding group and she must meet the minimum level requirements, in the case of BoT level 85.

Much as the raiding gamespace is distinguishable by its apartness from the normal gamespace, so is its threshold marking the entrance. Each raider has to move from the 'normal' gamespace to the raiding space—and that transition is marked by both an in-game (diegetic) marker and a non-diegetic function (when the game screen switches to a loading screen, see figure 6.15 below).

Figure 6.15. Example of a raiding instance loading screen, when the game transitions from normal game space to raiding space.

These gates providing access from one point (the normal game space) to another (the raiding game space) are seen as a 'warning and alert', a demarcation of space. The visual switch from the normal gamespace to a transitional 'loading screen' to the raiding instance provides a reminder of the mechanics of transition both from a diegetic perspective (the game's narrative shifts from the regular gamespace to the raiding space) and a non-diegetic one (the technical arrangements that separate game content). Even the death-like skull signifying that the raiding area is more difficult is a striking reminder that there is specificity to this transitional space; that its very location and access is controlled by design. It also draws an interesting link between the game and raider—the raider penetrates the gamespace by intentionally moving through one part (the 'normal' gamespace) into another (the raiding gamespace)—there is an overlap between the game and its player. And as the following section suggests, even the game itself (and its diegetic machine act) creates an interesting and unexpected way in which the game and player overlaps.

Video 6.4. Video footage depicting entering the raiding instance.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cw__IkDxLew. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

Entering a raiding instance [**see Video 6.4**] the raid group assembles and waits. The action of waiting is expressed in different ways in the raid space. Some far flung members are brought to the raid instance using a warlock ability called a 'Ritual of Summoning'. For those lingering in the instance, waiting for the rest of the group can feel endless. Some appear to stand stoically, staring off into the distance, others jump up and down or dance around, and others can be found fiddling with emotes or in-game

> pets or toys. Some might be seen sharing jokes or comments on the raid groups' chat channel. A kind of anticipation is suggested in these haphazard-like movements amidst the waiting. Even the avatar itself moves whilst standing still: an expression of action within inaction, a game-designed element that brings life to the stationary virtual image.

While some of these actions are performed by the raiders as they wait (as examples of how the player engages in different ways with the game's diegetic environment), some are not. The avatar that subtly readjusts their stance or looks around intermittently is an example of the way in which gamic action is performed by the game itself. The idea of action within inaction suggests there is an action or movement to everything in the gamespace, with waiting even being seen as a kind of action. Waiting is a good example of the way that the gamic moment of the *diegesis of the machine* is expressed. The idea of ambient motion or waiting, even the way in which the character itself passively waits, has a kind of action or movement to it designed by the game itself. This is exhibited by the character shifting its stance periodically, even if the player him or herself does not enact any movement. And the idea of the dynamic between the player and the character (avatar) and the interactive elements that are carried out before the action of raiding suggests the interactive functions of this raiding space, even beyond the core function of raiding itself. This is a good example of how the game's environment creates an atmosphere that *feels* active; and while these forms of gamic action may not be unique to raiding gameplay, observing a large, assembled group engaged in this form of *inactive* action does amplify the visual impact of this diegetic machine act. In contrast with these forms of non-player diegetic action are the forms of raider-controlled actions that are explored in the following section.

Video 6.5. Video depicting trash killing in the raid instance.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF7YMsmab6U. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

Waiting suddenly shifts into movement and the group progresses into the raid instance toward the first barrier it must overcome. **[see Video 6.5]** A group of enemies stands in the way, barring safe passage toward the group's eventual goal: the first raid boss. Enemies exist throughout a game like WoW. Dealing with conflict is central to the experience of the game raider. In a raid area these enemies bear the descriptive term of 'elite', which take far more coordinated fire power and control to eliminate. The raid leaders assign targets and tasks to certain members of the raid group. Each marked target requires a specific response and each target will be killed in a particular order.

Some targets are crowd-controlled (usually called 'CCed') to help delay their engagement in the fight—to *control* their joining the rest of the *crowd* of attackers. The mages are instructed to 'sheep' (using a spell called Polymorph) a target, rogues will 'sap' (renders the target unconscious), druids put targets to sleep, shamans turn targets into frogs (by casting a 'Hex' on them) and so on. All of these abilities incapacitate the target for a short while, allowing the raiding group to focus on killing off a more manageable number of enemies in an ordered fashion. When this group's killing process works well, the tanks can keep the attacking mobs focused on them, the damage dealers (DPS) can focus on killing the mobs, and the healers can heal the raid group. Once a certain mob has

been killed, the tanks will draw the attention of another CCed mob. This process of controlled damage continues until the last of the mobs have been killed.

Action in raiding is not merely the idea of movement or engagement in gameplay performance, it can also be about those times when the raider is engaged in the control of action. This is an example of the moment where the raider is involved in non-diegetic action within the gamic environment, where 'deliberate ends' meet 'actions of configuration' (Galloway, 2006: 12)—the team has a planned means by which to act toward a desired end. The very term 'crowd control' (commonly called 'CC' among raiders) is provocative, evoking a feeling of policing or exercising of control over a situation. In the case of the gamic action of the raiding group, CCing relates to the ability and aim of the raiding group to control the action of the raid itself and depicts the group's actual attempt to control the outcome in their favour. This also translates to the idea of 'controlled damage', again reminiscent of the ways in which action is carried out during a fight. There is configuration, there is restraint and there is control. This reinforces the idea of the raider (and the group subsequently) impacting and shaping the game environment much as the game environment impacts the player. At least the idea of the raider choosing to *control the action,* that is. There are times when the control of action is not always successful as well. A CC spell can fail (the game designs a certain degree of failure into it), for example, and trigger a loss of control of the group being targeted, thus allowing the game to overpower the group.

The corpse of each mob is searched for anything it might have had on it. [**see Video 6.5**] Prized items, like high-level gear (rated as 'epic gear'), are distributed to group members. The group now runs toward the boss. Running is the normal pace of movement in WoW; in fact it is the default movement speed for players. Players can walk, and game mechanics allow it, but the pace appears slow in the gamespace; it resembles walking

> underwater. Running represents normalcy of movement in an MMO. Is it that the gamespace is perceived as an obstacle to be crossed as quickly as possible, or is it the desire to reach the next goal that makes running everywhere seem so normal?

As noted above, in the *WoW* gamespace running, rather than walking as we're accustomed to seeing in the conventional world, is the 'default movement' of the persistent game environment. Running as the 'normalcy of movement' in a persistent game environment changes the nature of movement that exists in the MMO play space as compared to elsewhere. Even this sense that walking feels 'slow' in the game environment suggests that movement is not perceived or experienced in the same way as in the offline environment. It is movement made fast and efficient—where the player is intent on the outcome of raiding (the next raid boss or enemies to attack) and not the process. This form of action—as represented through movement—evokes the idea of configuration (or non-diegetic operator acts, as Galloway puts it [2006]) whereby the raider has the choice to walk if they want to, but the desire to access game content efficiently prompts the raider to configure the game's settings to move as quickly as possible. This way of interacting with the gamespace suggests a significant degree of raider control over gamic action, even as the game environment itself has a complicated and overlapping form of gamic action, as the following demonstrates.

Video 6.6.   Video footage depicting raiders buffing up before a boss encounter. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wigul7AtAGo. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[**see Video 6.6**]The boss stands before the group now. An ugly, disfigured monstrosity of a giant, it appears unaware of the group gathered before it. Flanking the giant are dragons. Until one of the tanks catches its attention by running toward it and starts the fight by triggering the boss' aggression (usually called 'aggro' by raiders), the group could easily stand here, unharmed and unaffected. This kind of invisibility whilst present suggests that there is a certain degree of control to the game environment. Merely appearing to see enemies from a distance will not draw the raid boss to attack the group—it is typically in the control of the raid group itself to determine engagement with the boss.

Perhaps nowhere is the idea of the game environment's (machine's) gamic control over the environment (and raiders) as well expressed as in the construction of invisibility in action. A raiding group's 'invisibility whilst present' does project a kind of artifice in the constructed game environment—the group is within the sights of the raid boss but the game controls its movements. This is an example of how the complicated nature of gamic action within the persistent game environment manifests itself: the group knows to stand a certain space away from the boss before the group gets its 'attention' which suggests that the raider exerting control over the environment; but on the other hand, the game environment itself controls the gamic action as long as the group adheres to its control. Due to the nature of the game's own diegesis, a raid group can often see the boss moving, interacting and even monologuing while it stands away at that safe distance—it seems aware of its own narrative while allowing this group to at least observe it (even if they are not engaging with it). The question of control (or allowance of control) overlaps and interact in the raiding environment, particularly in this notion of being invisible while present.

The raid leaders prepare the group by giving instructions, checking preparations, and clarifying any final questions. Team members cast

helpful spells on each other and consume potions and food that will enhance their performance. The leaders instruct the healers—typically 2 to 3 in a 10-man group or 6–7 in a 25-man group—on where they will focus their healing (typically some healers focus on the tanks while others concentrate on the entire raid group); the tanks learn what target they will have (there is usually a 'main' tank, an 'off tank', even a tank for 'adds') depending on the nature of the encounter; and the damage dealers (DPS) are given specific tasks based on their class and the encounter.

Video 6.7. Video depicting the raid fight against Halfus Wyrmbreaker (heroic). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuNidldxooc. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[**view Video 6.7**]The leader issues a countdown and the group prepares to engage in combat. '5... 4... 3... 2... 1... pulling...,' announces the tanking player. The tank charges in. A chaos of visual effects, movement, and noise suddenly erupts. Dragons fly to the aid of the boss, all intent on devastating the raiders. Some raiders charge in toward the boss while others spread out at a safer distance. A series of flashing lights and colourful effects flood the screen, a disorienting flurry where some are meant to warn the raider, others meant to injure the raider if not avoided, while even more may function to aid the group. The raid boss does not want to surrender easily so minions, spells and damaging blows are used to harm the group and disrupt their progress. While some bosses are physically massive and would seem able to swat away the raiders with a single blow, they don't often use sheer force alone to pummel their target; they focus their attention on unleashing varied attacks—all designed to be unique to that particular boss—which show up on the raider's view screen

as a visual barrage of impact, appearing in a somewhat disarrayed manner across the area.

And thus begins the series of staged and practiced gamic actions by raiders reacting to the anticipated and unpredictable actions of the boss. Does the fire shooting from the sky signal danger; do we need protecting? Will a large circle forming on the ground inflict harm; should we move? Can we avoid the massive concentric circles of light that spread across the area? And what of the flooding wall of flame that encompasses us all? Can we stand in the green circles that team mates cast? Do we need to stand far apart from each other to prevent greater injury to each other? How can we see where to move and who to avoid? How do we see who to attack and when? How do we understand the information appearing on the screen—the numbers indicating damage (yellow), the ones that tell us we are healed (green), the ones that alert us to danger, the ones that tell us to prepare for a special assault the boss will unleash? How do we know that we can cast a spell? And with our team mates, how can we tell if they live or die? When do we know to heal them or to aid them? Each visual element must be prepared for and responded to, each action must be understood and tracked, and each reaction by the boss must be mitigated.

The aural elements of the boss fight are designed to provide both atmosphere and warning and can trigger immersion in the raid. These combined elements draw the raider in and provide additional information amidst the stream of visual activity and movement. 'Cho'gall will have your heads! ALL OF THEM!' the boss yells. Explosions erupt, weapons strike, spells burst, enemies attack—and each is represented by specific sounds. Raiders often integrate the use of software (in the form of 'addons') designed to emit specific sounds to alert them of certain events during a fight which may require a specific response. The combination of music, atmosphere, sound effects and software-generated alarms is accompanied—in many cases, though not all—by the human voice. The

raid group may use voice over IP software[99] to allow raid leaders to give instruction on particular elements of the boss fight. 'Adds incoming,' a voice might warn. 'Spread out,' alerts another.[100]

Touch figures prominently in any raid as the raider engages with the computer keyboard and mouse in order to perform the actions of the raid. The tactile experience connects the real to the virtual, the player to the persistent gaming environment. Each movement, each action is predicated by the function of touch. With a hand on the mouse and fingertips on the keyboard, touch enables movement but it requires a well-timed response and practiced coordination to be effective in the raid. Raiders will modify and arrange their keyboard and mouse set up to be as efficient as possible[101]. Slow response times can impair the group and even cause a wipe.

There are two areas of concern in gamic action that I would like to address here: first the idea of the multisensory experience of gamic action in raiding and second the complex overlapping ways in which action is performed and understood. As was highlighted earlier in this chapter (see p. 206), there is a malleability of the technology that helps frame the raiding gamespace and experience of raiding gameplay. And this raiding gamespace is a multisensory one. The raider is engaged in a 'series of staged' (pre-shaped, non-diegetic operator acts) and 'practiced movements' while navigating the boss fight. She is bombarded with the 'aural, visual, physical and tactile experience' of raiding—even the user interface has been arranged and designed (by the raider herself) to accommodate and

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[99] Voice-over IP (VOIP) software refers to programs such as Skype, Ventrilo, Mumble or Team Speak, all designed to enable conference calling-like features. Many raiding groups use this form of software (as part of the gamespace) alongside raiding to help communicate directions and information.

[100] The audio recording included in Chapter 5 provides a good example of how groups communicate using VOIP during raid activity (see recording 5.1).

[101] See the earlier section where the deskspace and the modification and placement of objects across its space are considered by raiders.

streamline the surge of information that appears in different ways. Decision-making in action are paramount during the raiding encounter itself and the raider (and group) need to prioritise certain gamic action over others—some of these are diegetic in nature (responding to the activity of the boss fight, know that not moving at a certain point will result in death) and some are non-diegetic (the visual display of gamic information, the raider's arrangement of the gamespace itself). Perhaps most apt is Galloway's description of the overlapping, multiphrenic way that the game is not only presented but how the raider 'interfaces' with the game:

> an intraface between the heads-up-display, the text and icons in the foreground, and the 3D, volumetric, diegetic space of the game itself—on the one side, writing; on the other, image. (2009: 946)

And to echo Galloway's observation (as earlier cited in this chapter) about the diegetic and non-diegetic overlap of the gamespace (through the interface), these two types of gamic action are equally important (2009) to the raider and become essential to navigate during these seemingly chaotic gamic encounters. The video footage above shows this complexity: there is movement and there is action; there is both the sound of the game and the group's discussion. The multisensory is not just one aspect of raiding gameplay, it is integral. Thus the diegetic experience of raiding can be defined as a multitude of gamic actions that require complex and varying responses by each raider and each group. This can be particularly noteworthy in relation to how death happens within the raid environment.

Death can and does happen to raiders during a fight. A certain class of player (druids) has the ability to bring another player back to life during combat (other classes can bring players back to life when out of combat: paladins, priests, shamans), but depending on the situation, the body may lay there prone, awaiting the outcome of the fight—either in the team's or boss' favour. The player can see the events unfold around his dead body, but he remains lifeless, incapable of movement, unable to speak. A range of emotions can set in when a death occurs: frustration or embarrassment is often felt by the dead player if their death was needless or the result of careless behaviour; stress or anxiety may be felt by the remaining players,

> knowing they have less than the optimal number of raiders to complete the fight. A raider who dies early during a fight could be asked to explain 'what happened' to cause their death. If it was a mistake on the part of the raider, he is expected to learn from the mistake and not repeat it again.[102]

As I note above, 'death can and does happen to raiders during a fight'. Galloway refers to 'the moment of gamic death' (2006: 28) as an emblematic moment of non-diegetic machine action where the game itself levies the outcome against the player. I'd like to build on this idea when considering it within the context of raiding. While I concur with Galloway that death is a result of the game's action against the raider or an expression of non-diegetic bad luck (where game lag causes performance delays that result in death), it can also be an outcome of the failure of the raider or group, representing what seems like the failure of a diegetic gamer act (operator) that is simply completed (and enabled) by the machine. And failure can have a significant impact on gamic action. When failing an encounter, the entire group may experience collective death, or a 'wipe'. Much like the notions of the unseen by the seen and the idea of running supplanting walking within the raiding play space, death does not function in a conventional manner in the persistent game environment; death is a sign of failure or inconvenience, but rarely a sign of finality. And in relation to the ideas of death of the raider is the experience of the death of the raid boss, as explored below.

> The fight has to be completed within six minutes or the boss 'enrages'. Enraging results in the boss suddenly manifesting a significant boost in power and quickly overwhelming the raid group. In this fight, the group needs to successfully pass through several stages (often called phases by raiders) before the boss can be killed. If the group successfully withstands damage from the boss by navigating the impact of fire, wind and freezing (among others) by utilizing and correctly reacting to the multi-sensory

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[102] Further consideration was given to the experience of failure and formation in Chapter 5.

elements of gamic environment to navigate the particular elements of the fight, the boss will eventually fall.

The death of a boss is met with emotions like satisfaction, celebration and relief (recalling the 'nerdscream' recording in the introduction). The very first time a group kills a particular boss they may gather for a 'kill shot' to mark the occasion (see figure 6.16 below). And as it's possible that some in the group may have died during the fight, the short period of time after the boss has died may be devoted to raising the dead.

Figure 6.16. Example of a 'kill shot', where 25 raiders are gathered around the dead body of the boss.

Video 6.8. Video footage depicting failure on Valiona and Theralion.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jPGJ9y9idk. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[**view Video 6.8**] The group has seen success and now moves ahead, deeper into the raiding instance to face the next challenge. The next raid encounter consists of two dragons that each require a different approach to successfully overpower them. Not all encounters run smoothly the first try, however. Groups may find it impossible to handle the assault of the boss and die before it can be killed. Time may run out, too many raiders may have died or not enough damage is generated to mitigate the impact from the boss. In the case of the footage, minutes of effort will have gone by before the group begins to lose the battle. The combined impact of damage caused by each boss, the slow but steady death of members of the raiding group, and the reduced numbers of raiders available to assault the boss slowly build up to a failure that many raiders dread: the 1% wipe. A boss usually begins each encounter with a set health pool; damage caused by raiders slowly diminishes that pool until the boss itself has been overcome. Some encounters—especially when a raiding group is new to successfully completing them—allow little room for error. In the case of the footage, this group faces Valiona and Theralion for only the second time on the heroic difficulty level. Over the course of the raid, a dozen attempts have been made but the bosses have overpowered the group too effectively, causing them to wipe repeatedly. This attempt appears the strongest yet. Yet four raiders, all damage dealers, are suddenly dead at eight minutes into the fight.

> The boss has now lost 91% of its health and its death seems imminent. But the loss of key damage dealers combined with two more deaths by the 5% health mark means, however, that the group has lost key damage dealers and may not be able to complete the attack before the boss enrages and quickly decimates the group. Suddenly more are killed as the boss enrages and attacks the group indiscriminately. The boss' health at this point is 0.1%, or 164,000 health points out of a total of 164 million. The boss hangs on by a hair's breath. But raiders are unable to kill off the boss before it kills them. The raid group all dies (wipes) with the boss near health at 1%. This kind of striking loss in the face of near victory can have a negative, distracting impact on the raid group. Re-establishing focus and control over the team's movements and activities becomes paramount.

Much like the experience of death, failure is a recurring expression of the diegetic in the raiding space and is represented not only through how the raiding group may fail but also how the game itself controls or succumbs to failure. If raiding encounters 'allow little room for error', then the action of raiding requires an acceptance of its possible failure. Complexity and difficulty in raiding events are a mechanic of game design and raiders can attempt the same challenge repeatedly until they succeed. Therefore, built into the process of pursuing success is the repeated experience of failure. This means that while on the one hand an encounter is repeatedly failed, it also means that the raiders have just not found the best way to succeed yet.

> And the raid continues. The raiding group will continue to raid weekly until they can confidently—and quickly—kill all of the raid bosses in as short a time as possible. When new raiding content is released, the raiding group will move on to the new areas. This cycle will continue as long as the guild chooses to engage in raiding activity.

By tracing raiding through its specifically designed space, I have drawn out those complex and overlapping engagements of gamic action that are present in the raiding environment. This was necessary in order to consider the action of raiding and its complexity representing the guiding principle of engagement in raiding: that of action. By looking closely at these formal aspects of action in the raiding game space—those that are most easily associated with the diegetic gaming experience—one can draw out the ways in which both the game and raiders navigate this pre-shaped, controlled and gamer-modified environment. Within this environment exists the dynamic of controlled action and movement—on the part of both the game and the raider—in the raiding space that frames the gameplay experience itself, one that is both multisensory and active in nature.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to engage in the ideas of action in raiding by both exploring the overlapping spaces within which gamic action is shaped and the forms of gamic action that are represented through raiding. By so doing, my intent was to capture those expressions of action that help define and frame engagement in raiding gameplay and which present the most meaning to raiders themselves. Action in raiding is multifaceted in its representation: for the raider, action in raiding means not only the act of raiding gameplay itself, but also those nondiegetic actions and forms that work around and in support of the gamic action of raiding. These explorations of action connect to the ideas of formation as explored in Chapter 5 where I argued that raiders create (and pre-determine) not only the ways in which they *form and arrange* themselves and their groups (through formation), but also how groups *shape* their gameplay and *act* within the *gamespace* itself (through action). Within this chapter I integrated the ideas of space and movement into the very fabric of action in raiding for it is these overlapping ways in which the game environment functions for the raider that comprise its fundamental form of engagement. The spatial relationships within the action of play are not distinctive ideas but work more in concert to enable raiding game play. This is due to space and action being malleable in the

persistent game environment, more than many other types of digital game space. So while I concur with Ash's critique (2010) of Galloway's own categorization of gamic action (2006) not engaging with the spatial structures of the game space, in my own adaptation of his framework to study raiding gameplay, I have drawn together the relationships between space and gamic action as equally integral to the action of raiding itself. I find that these two elements are fundamental to an engagement with the raiding game space and cannot be seen as distinctive from each other.

When considering the notion of space and action in the persistent game environment, the dynamics between action and space and the immaterial and material need addressing, particularly in light of how previous academic research has focused on the nature of the real and virtual in relation to the online environment. My work in this chapter contributes both to the body of work into virtual geography and to studies around the spaces of online game play. These spaces of online game play are malleable, messy, and overlapping and the shifts between the material and immaterial both significant and indistinguishable to raiders while engaged in raiding. In tracing the ways in which raiders engage with the spaces of game play in the persistent game environment, I drew out a trio of overlapping spaces, the *deskspace, gamespace* and *interspace.* These types of space worked in concert, I outlined, to create the landscape of raiding game play in the persistent game environment. My intention in distinguishing each element of gamic space was to break down the core components of these spatial elements that exist across the the physical and virtual spaces of play in order to better understand how space functions in the persistent game environment.

My own experiences as a researcher navigating the raiding spaces of play traversed these types of space that I outline here, spaces that comprise the building blocks of this overlapping real/virtual space. This approach reflected perhaps my own way of coming to terms with what Crang *et al* (1999: 8) describe as 'a space that allows access to extra-local knowledges and encounters'. But as a raider myself I was never fully aware of these differences across the spaces of

gameplay. I was often so immersed in my own gameplay action that I ceased to realise when my hand was controlling my mouse on the *deskspace* in order to perform an action within the *gamespace,* for example. In my mind these actions were taking place simultaneously and both spaces were necessary for the action to be realised. So, while I have outlined these specific forms of space as a way to better understand the ways in which the real and virtual interacts in the persistent game environment, these forms are far less distinguishable in action. It reminded me of what Adams wrote when considering the notion of communication and the self: 'through communication we constantly surpass the body's physical boundaries' (2005: xi). And if we regard the navigation of the online, persistent game environment as a kind of communication with that space then a surpassing of the boundaries between the material (real) and immaterial (virtual) seems inevitable, particularly if a raider wants to act in the space to the degree that a raider typically wants to. This brings me to another of the contributions that this chapter makes to the body of work around virtual geographies. Through studying the online gamic experience of raiding which is both extremely active and sustained, this work contributes to our understanding of how space is adapted, utilized and traversed across these material and immaterial boundaries. And it is this interrelatedness of space and action that are distinctive in raiding and shape the ways in which raiders play.

As I note above, space in raiding game play is a multiphrenic experience that is less defined by its immateriality or materiality than by its activity. Action shapes and utilizes the space. Beyond this are the ways in which the material—and in this case technology in particular—is adapted and used in the action of play across space. I assert that the material and immaterial are both equally significant in online gamic action. While some research in the past has focused on how accessing a virtual world allows a transcendence over physicality (Becker, 2000), I find trying to determine the supremacy of the material over the immaterial and vice versa in raiding to be a problematic endeavour. Some academic research has endeavoured to encapsulate the interactions between the material and immaterial and technology through the image of the cyborg (Haraway, 1991; Becker, 2000). The cyborg, Haraway explains, 'is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and

organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (1991: 149). The embodiment of the action of raiding is well portrayed through this description. The places of raiding action are reflected through a spatial *hybridity* between the deskspace, gamespace, and that interspace between—both material and immaterial (the deskspace and gamespace), and existing within the realms of reality (the player) and fiction (the narrative of the game). Once the focus of the player is oriented toward the use of the space in the production of action then the various distinctions between the material and immaterial begin to fall away.

Reviewing figure 6.2c (the photograph of the communal deskspace), one can observe this dynamic hybridizing of technology with the human—the players have headsets on, their hands rest on a mouse and keyboard, their faces are engaged with the screen. While these cyborg-like associations may be temporary in scope, they do allow us a means by which to work through the complexity of 'dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves' (Haraway, 1991: 181). The work done on action and space in this chapter contributes to these literatures around the dynamics of physicality and virtuality and provide an atmosphere within which to consider further questions about the nature of a cyborg identity within the persistent game environment, where the game itself becomes part of this overarching identity. Gamic action works in concert with (and modifies) material and immaterial space to produce raiding. This chapter paints a picture of what gamic action looks like in its holistic sense and also helps illustrate the duality that seems to often emerge in a great deal of academic work which has considered our interaction with the online space: real/virtual; material/immaterial (Becker, 2000); bodies/machines (Haraway, 1991); separation and connectedness (Healy, 1996). All of these dualisms can be explored and represented through considering the space and action of raiding gameplay in the persistent game environment. To best explore the active in raiding, I decided that my own study and analysis had to employ an active, multisensory approach. From this active engagement in the action of raiding, I drew out some of the complex ways by which raiders can and do modify, adapt to, apply and control their actions through the raiding gameplay process. This is because of the many ways that action in raiding is represented both across the

persistent game environment and within the space of raiding activity itself. I also looked at the ways that raiders actively modify and adapt to the raiding space to success complete raiding content, even if it takes an extensive amount of failures before finally reaching success.

A reflection about this complexity in gamic action is warranted as I conclude this chapter. In relation to the nuanced spatial relations that exist in the raider's play space: I had always presupposed that a relationship existed between space and the raider when I began my study of action in raiding, but I had not anticipated the depth and complexity of *active* engagement with the space of play that actually takes place. That raiders can both modify and build layers of space—gamespace, deskspace, interspace—with such specificity was certainly an unexpected discovery. This may be a result of the malleability of the medium (the computer) on which games like WoW are played; or it may be the fact that MMOs are truly borne of the Internet age and thus complex layering of active spatial relationships could be seen as indicative of the active relationship with space in this digital age. Whatever the reason, the preliminary consideration of these overlapping spatial relationships as presented in this chapter does suggest the value of further engagement with the geography of raiding.

Just as layers of space in the persistent game environment are malleable, so too are how raiders shape their gamic actions in the space of play. Gamic action in raiding can be described as a series of interrelated experiences where the gamic is expressed through movement, spatiality and, most fundamentally, action within and through the game environment. Applying Galloway's framework for considering related yet distinctive ways (moments) in which gamic action exists in game environments has been a particularly helpful way to attend to these different ways that action takes place in raiding, particularly considering the complex nature of multiplayer gameplay in an MMO. In the case of this chapter's exploration, it is clear that action (and its related experience of movement) in raiding is controlled, complex, multisensory, overlapping and often comprises many simultaneous moments that work to create new ways of expressing and

performing these moments of action. While the nature of spatiality in raiding has its pre-shaped and organized elements, for the raider its experience and interface is one of malleability and multiphrenicity, where the relationships between the hard, soft, and interstitial spaces function not so much to define gameplay but more so to shape and enable it. Action, and its related forms of space and movement, all combine to represent what I term raiding's core principle of engagement, where the very relationship with, and the navigation of, the experience of raiding resides. Raiding is not just about 'playing a game', it is also about shaping both action and space of play. In the following chapter, I take this idea of the complex shaping of action in raiding—and as suggested in the previous chapter where I explored the idea of localized specificity in the formation of groups—to build further on my study of the raiding community to delineate the ways that raiders want to play the game: primarily through an expression of the layers of competitive gameplay that permeates the raiding environment.

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Chapter 7:

Considering the layers of competition in raiding

> If you know us at all, you know that we do this mostly for the competition. We think it's fun and enjoy it. If that wasn't the case, only very few of us would be playing. —Synti, Paragon guild, January 2011

Introduction

Chapter 5 focused on the nature of formation as the fundamental organizing principle of raiding and Chapter 6 considered the core principle of engagement with raiding by looking at its forms of action within the gamespace. This chapter now explores the central expression of raiding itself, namely the layers of competition in raiding is enacted. This thesis has a recurring theme that has been raised in earlier chapters which I would like to re-state: raiding in the persistent game environment is made distinctive by a number of specific, yet complex gamic actions that help frame its experience of play. When thinking about gamic action in the raiding play space, I propose that it is not just about its movements, activity, space or formation (as I've delineated in earlier chapters), it is also about *the way* in which we like to engage in gameplay—in the case of raiding this 'way' is often expressed in the pursuit of competition. I also propose that because of the way that an MMO game is designed—as a game designed to never end—the complex ways that competition are enacted become the ways that raiders and groups 'win' the unwinnable game. In my ethnographic work with raiders,

particularly during interviews and group discussions, a question I would often ask was 'why they liked to raid'. Many would talk about the group-play experience or the fun of solving difficult challenges, but above all, most would also refer to the process of 'winning', 'competing' or accomplishing the goals of raiding. There seemed to be great satisfaction and meaning found in racing against each other (or the game) to beat the content first—and this began help shape and define my finding that competition, and its nuanced expressions within raiding, was as distinctive to this form of playing as its definability as a group-oriented, active gamic medium. Studying the forms and expressions of competition in raiding, as will be shown in this chapter, is a useful way to extend and apply those concepts explored in earlier chapters—particularly the specific practices of gamic action within the complexity of the persistent game environment—to a set of distinguishing principles that shapes the nature of raiding.

As a participant observer in raiding, I sought to explore and identify the distinctive nuances of raiding through, primarily, the perspective and actions of raiders themselves. I looked for what raiders identified as motivating them to raid in the persistent game environment, even when comparing raiding to other types of computer-based games. I wanted to know why they raid and what drew them to the activity. In the case of my ethnographic work with raiders, the notion of competition recurred as a value and an oft-expressed ideal of the community, typically above and beyond other values. Perhaps this is no better expressed than by the raider Synti (as quoted above) in response to the question 'why do you raid': that among the reasons to raid, the *competitive* aspect of raiding does attract and engage players in its activity. This idea of the value of raiding became a recurring statement among the raiders I raided with and those I also observed and interviewed. Coupled with this is the proposal that I make in this chapter that competition is not merely an important construct of the game design itself, but is enacted in varied player-driven ways both between individual raiders and the groups they may belong to. Considering the significance that raiders have placed on the engagement of competition, particularly as I have delineated, and the lack of scholarly contribution to this area of study, this chapter aims to both highlight the ways in which competition is enacted through raiding and to contribute this

understanding toward the scholarly work around competition in digital game play, particularly in relation to how competition is enacted and experienced by teams and individuals in the persistent game environment.

As a broad concept, competition is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the striving of two or more for the same object' and is further articulated by Dr Johnson as, 'The action of endeavouring to gain what another endeavours to gain at the same time' (OED, 2012). This suggests that competition represents the action of pursuing advantage (and success) over the same desired object and is a helpful way to think about competition within the framework of raiding. For the purposes of this chapter, I will frame my consideration of competition with this definition in mind. Competition is ubiquitously represented in popular culture such as in television game shows, reality programming and sports. Even in certain digital games competitive games circuits have been established, reminiscent and similar in structure and organisation to major sports tournaments and often referred to as e-sports (or pro-gaming).[103] (Taylor, 2012) And while professionalised competition has yet to emerge in raiding game play, its function and pursuit is still very much a part of the experience of raiding. In fact, the nuanced forms of competition as expressed through raiding becomes a way for raiders to play and 'win' at a game that is designed without a tangible ending. Competition, along with the significance of group formation and depth and complexity of gamic action (as highlighted in the preceding chapters), become the defining features of raiding game play because they enable sustained gameplay.

For players in an MMO like *World of Warcraft* (WoW), the function and experience of competition is manifested through the various actions of players,

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[103] Probably one of the best examples of e-sports or pro-gaming (and its similarity, at least in conception and structure, to sporting events) is Major League Gaming, a professional gamer competitive circuit and self-described 'competitive gaming community'. (http://www.majorleaguegaming.com/mlg/about. Last accessed November 24, 2012.) The name and even the logo of this particular competitive gaming community is reminiscent of another major sports competition, Major League Baseball, which is the overseeing organization for the sport of professional baseball in North America. (http://mlb.mlb.com/index.jsp. Last accessed November 24, 2012.)

game functions and game outcomes. In the case of the raider, competition is a distinctive core value that is experienced on many levels of play. And while I assert that competition is a highly valued part of gameplay for raiders, it still remains relatively understudied by games researchers and underrepresented in academic literature. Perhaps the reason for this is due to a perception that, like the notion of play, an orientation toward competition in games is so commonplace that it becomes unremarkable.

The aim of this chapter is to fill the gaps in research around competition and digital games by providing this in-depth study that situates the relationship between competition and the raider in his or her orientation toward play: to locate and affirm this distinctive experience within the broader exploration of gaming. It examines its impact on the overall community of raiding and the ways in which competition is enacted in specific and overlapping ways. As raiding is often described and distinguished by its orientation toward group play against a computer-generated foe, the function of competition within that framework is not only be oriented toward the group's experience against the game-designed 'boss' but is also specific and represented by competition within groups or between individuals and between groups. Competition exists in the raiding environment as a kind of malleable, adaptive entity, with raiders enacting its function in a variety of ways by using and interacting with both human and non-human elements along the way, much like the ways in which raiders form groupings (see Chapter 5) and engage with the action of raiding itself (as explored in Chapter 6).

Similar to the ways that gamic action in raiding can be thought through as a series of interrelated 'moments' where the gamic is expressed and performed in different ways through and within the game environment, I would like, through this chapter, to propose a similar approach to thinking through the ways that competition exists and functions in the raiding game environment. Competition in raiding is comprised of a trio of expressions by raiders and raiding guilds— through the individual, group, and game—and it helps shape the raider's

approach to and navigation of his or her play space, thus building on the ways in which the action of raiding is both experienced and expressed by raiders.

Locating competition in earlier games research

In the pre-existing research done into group play and, in the smaller amount of research done into game raiding groups, coordination and collaboration have been identified as important and significant concerns (Brown and Bell, 2004; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Chen, 2010). The action or enaction of game play and games-related activities has also been explored in relation to MMOs (Wright *et al,* 2002; Ducheneaut *et al,* 2006). Social interaction and group formation has also often been identified as a predominant in the MMO experience (Brown and Bell, 2004; Williams *et al,* 2006; Moore *et al,* 2007); and this social interaction is also suggested within the raiding activity of MMOs (Taylor, 2006; Williams *et al,* 2006; Yee, 2009; Chen, 2010). In fact, a significant portion of academic work and consideration has been given to the experience and function of social interaction and group coordination when looking at MMO gaming. And yet while raiding can be seen as encapsulating all of these aforementioned MMO-particular features—active, formative, performative or creative—and is also explored in more depth in the earlier chapters of this thesis, raiding is also notable for its propensity toward competition. But the study of the experience of competitive gameplay between gamers, and in particular among raiders, has been surprisingly understudied and represents a gap in games research literature. But why the gap? This could be due to a preference on the part of games researchers to focus on what seems most novel about the MMO game environment: its persistence and virtuality; the creative activities that surround and bleed beyond the confines of the game; its narrative; and the complex depth of its social interaction and structure. Could it be related to a notion that since being competitive in a game is often considered central to the experience of play, then studying its context, variety, value and occurrence may seem redundant or unnecessary? Or perhaps it reflects a sensitivity within current games research to focus more on the positive aspects of gaming, wherein competition could be portrayed in its negative aspect, and as a potentially trigger for or enhancer of aggressive or conflict-driven (Anderson, 2004) behaviour among gamers.

Nevertheless, certain specific words and terms have been coined or adopted to refer to certain types of activities in online games like MMOs, some of which do hint at the competitive experience. The term *power gamer* is one such example. This term reflects the idea of a gamer whose style of gameplay is oriented toward, in Taylor's (2006: 72) words, 'efficiency and instrumental orientation, dynamic goal setting, a commitment to understanding the underlying game systems/structures, and technical and skill proficiency.' In effect a power gamer wants to streamline their gameplay to the extent that they can level up their characters as quickly as possible and optimise their gear and performance. For Silverman and Simon (2009) the notion of power gaming, as their discussion of this experience is explored in the MMOs *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest,* is highlighted with experiences of 'the collective, if not emergent, production of winning and losing conditions' of a game (357). While their discussion of the power gamer hints at competition through the ideas of winning and losing and does devote attention to the priorities of power gamers in relation to large group play—or raiding—experience, it is oriented more toward considering the processes of play in relation to beating or mastering the game. While this does lay the groundwork for studying an interwoven relationship between the experience of cooperation and competitive relations in groups and raiding, Silverman and Simon's discussion (2009) does not actually expound further on competition.

While the concept of a power gamer has been used by some to reflect an intense orientation and focus on play aimed at maximising a character and its potentialities in the game environment, it does omit something important about a gamer who is oriented toward high success in his or her game play experience, particularly in relation to raiding, namely considering the complex ways that competition might function in the 'power gamer' play experience. And I should note that while power gaming has been, up until this point, one of the more common ways that games researchers have opted to describe these intense forms of gameplay, my own research conducted in the raiding community over a two-

year period has yet to run across an MMO game raider[104] who describes him or herself as a 'power gamer'. That is not to say that the term does not hold relevancy in relation to MMO players, but surely the fact that the term 'power gaming' is not used by raiders themselves suggests a degree of disconnect between academic work and the values that the raiding community assigns itself. Recent work around the notion of e-sports or professionalised gaming has also described it as a core element of the digital game and a new and emerging type of sport (Johansson and Thibørg, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012).

And while earlier researchers had attempted to identify the various motivations or reasons for play among video and computer gamers (Selnow, 1984; Wigand et al, 1985; Myers, 1990; Griffiths, 1991), the motive of competition as a reason for playing video or computer games was not explored. Bartle (1996: 1) does suggest, in his work on gamer 'types', that certain types of players (identified by him as 'achievers') are 'perhaps' prone to 'a competitive element'. But it wasn't until 2003 (Sherry and Lucas) that research began to identify competition as a key motivating factor for video game play[105]. Sherry and Lucas (2003) found that *beating friends* was the second highest motivating factor for playing video games. Missing from their discussion, however, are the different forms of competition such as competing against the game or the idea of competing against one's own game performance being their own motivating factors for play. And in their consideration of age- and gender-driven orientations toward types of videogames and their gratifications, Greenberg et al (2010) studied the playing motives of players (again, limited to console game play). They identified that 'the majority of video games have direct competition' (253). And while their research suggests a more limited scope of definition for competition—'When I lose to someone, I want to play them again and beat them'—their research clearly identified competition as the highest rated gratification for playing video games among its research with over one thousand school and university students, with the gratification score for competition being highest among 12–14 year olds and 15–17

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[104] I should state here that this observation is limited only to the raiders with whom I conducted my research.

[105] It's important to clarify here that Sherry and Lucas' work was oriented toward console-based video game and arcade game play, not computer-based games.

year olds. Greenberg *et al* acknowledge that identifying competition as the primary motive for video game playing is unsurprising. They also note that competition was a prime motivating factor for two of their three identified game genres—physical and imagination. What was not identified in this study, however, was the different ways that competition is enacted and experienced by these gamers nor did it compare the experience of competition between primarily console-based gamers and computer-based gamers; and what this chapter aims to do is fill this significant gap of literature by contributing work that draws out the nuances of competition, particularly as it exists in the raiding environment.

Another area of study that hints at competition is that of *expertise* or *skill.* Skill, or the ability to successfully and ably master and navigate the game play experience, has been studied in depth in relation to the MMO group play experience (Chen, 2010) and in other computer games such as *Counter-Strike* (Reeves *et al,* 2009). These studies into game *expertise* often focus on games that are heavily oriented toward competition between players or teams, where winning and losing are integral elements and goals of the game experience. But even though these studies are oriented toward the process that players follow in order to master and excel in their gameplay experience, the goal or outcome of that play experience—where there is a winner or loser—appears less explored in preference for a concentration on the way that play is pursued, namely through its collaborative or socially interactive aspects. What the literature has not significantly explored, however, is the impact of competition on gamic skill development.

The discussion in this section indicates that while the pre-existing research into games has not made a significant study into the relationship between competition and digital game play, it has considered certain other core elements do form a kind of affinity with concepts of competition. The following section will trace the locus of competition within game raiding and the different ways and forms in which it is represented, as expressed by raiders themselves.

Competition in the persistent game environment

Competition manifests itself in different ways in an MMO such as WoW and is particularly expressed through the experience of game raiding. Raiding is oriented toward team play which aims to defeat (or beat) the game-designed challenges and awards achievements and other rewards (such as topping the world or server rankings) when the team defeats these enemies. The raiding team may also be competing against other teams to be first to defeat these game-designed raid 'bosses', to win their local server races or even the global race to be the first to complete new game content. Furthermore members of raiding teams themselves may experience competition between them or identify a competitive attitude as enhancing or enabling their own approach to gameplay. While competitive experiences in play are intrinsically linked to notions of winning and losing and success and failure; they also seem linked to associations with personal enjoyment, self-improvement and team play. The types and forms of competition and the ways in which it is enacted and experienced by the game raider are varied and are defined in different ways by raiders themselves. Competition functions significantly on different levels and in different ways amongst raiders: between individual members within a raiding group; by individual players across the gameverse; within raiding guilds; on the game server level; and through the game design itself. For some, the experience of competition in raiding is a more personal one, while for others competition is oriented externally toward the activities of a raiding guild. However it is experienced, it is significant to a raider and can help define their success and ability to perform in the role.

The following excerpt from a discussion with Lappe, a raider in the Finnish guild Paragon, identifies how his orientation toward competition and experience in sports impacted his practice of raiding.

> *Ladan:* What makes you come back to raiding? What keeps your interest?
> *Lappe:* Theres a lot of things, like solving puzzles etc, but i think it comes down to one - competition. I've always been very competitive person (you can tell when watching to our warehouse, its full of medals and trophys of my childhood as i used to be pretty good at every sport whether it was x-country skiing, 100m to 3km race, long jumping, javelin etc.) so i just like to be as good as possible... It's my passion, once again im very competetive *(sic)* thus i want to do my best and i pretty much know how to play my class so...

For Lappe competition is central to sustaining his interest in raiding and he links his propensity for being competitive in raiding to his youthful experiences with competitive sports. Also the notion of being competitive is indelibly linked to his desire to 'do my best'. This statement of Lappe's, though admittedly only one individual raider's perception of the experience of raiding, is also suggestive of an indelible link between experiencing competition with the on-going enjoyment of raiding. The nature of this orientation toward competition frames the exploratory basis of this chapter and suggests a transformation of competition to something beyond simply the contest between players. For the raider, competition is seen as not only an important impetus for success against the game or other raiders, but also represents a fundamental expression of the enjoyment of raiding itself. The next section explores competitive relations in depth by exploring its function within the raiding community through considering the different and intersecting manifestations of competition in raiding. The chapter will then conclude with an exploration of a competitive event in the raiding community that illustrates the ways in which these overlapping forms of competition are expressed during gameplay.

Tracing competition in raiding

Competition is represented in a variety of ways in raiding gameplay. The concept of *competition* can be interpreted as the means by which an individual or group might engage in a contest against another, a group of others, or the game itself. This notion is particularly well represented in raiding when considering its most fundamental goal is to overcome (or beat) the game-designed adversary, the 'boss'. In fact, there are a more complex series of nuances in competition that can be identified when tracing the specific actions that take place within and through raiding. Even how competition is expressed and experienced often extends beyond the actual intended scope of gamic design. And these enactments express themselves as distinctive and overlapping elements of a broader orientation toward competition and gaming, though which specific experiences, notions and sociotechnical expressions take shape.

These different forms of competition are evidenced through the ways in which raiders themselves have identified the ways that competition exists in game play and it is also evidenced through my own observations of the MMO raiding environment as built in and established by the game's designers, Blizzard. Tracing these three distinctive yet interactive forms and expressions of competition among raiding helps paint a picture of how competition exists and how its use and meaning has been adapted and enacted on by the raiding community in an MMO like WoW. The following three sections examine these forms of competition through both the experiences and reflections of raiders themselves and my own experiences as a researcher participant in the raiding community.

Gamic competition in raiding

The gamic representation of competition can be defined as perhaps its more widely understood notion where the player competes against the designed challenges of the game or that the game itself creates a competitive environment or expects a competitive mindset of its players. This notion of gamic competition is even reflected in an often-used way of describing a core mode of play in an MMO: PVE. PVE stands for 'player vs. environment', or the player locked in conflict or competition against the game, best represented through raiding boss fights. This type of competition is not only significant to the game's narrative and scope of design but can also help define the raider's overall approach to play. It sows important seeds that develop the perception that raiding is, at its core and among other attributes, an activity that nurtures and enables competitiveness. This runs counter to the assertion or finding in some literatures (Fu-Yun Yu *et al,* 2008) that competitive approaches can have a negative impact on performance or motivation. In fact, as raiders Fixation, Tokk and Prue note below, the competitive 'approach' or 'edge' helps create and define that raider and his or her experience of play against the game, the gamic.

> ...It's very important (I'd say) to have a <u>competitive approach</u> as a raider. ... it can help you better yourself and help you strive to become a better player because of it. (Fixation, Bridgeburners guild, email interview, March 2011)

> For me personally compet[it]ion (sp) plays a rather large role, coming from a background in <u>more cutthroat games.</u> (Tokk, Bridgeburners guild, IRC interview, March 2011)

> I think it is <u>important to have a competitive edge</u> as a raider, or at least a <u>motivation to raid.</u> (Prue, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

For Fixation competitiveness in raiding is linked to improved player performance; for Tokk, a competitive experience is not only related to a single game but to the broader experience of gaming and a predilection toward 'cutthroat' (or highly competitive) games. Prue identifies the competitive edge as being a key indicator of actual drive, 'motivation' to raid. With such notions of performance and motivation being driven by the raiding experience, the raid itself is designed and intended to be its own kind of competitive experience. In essence, many of the raid encounters become a race in and of themselves: these races are against time, against skill, against random actions—all generated by the game-designed enemy or 'boss'.

The experience of gamic competition among raiders can be represented through the ways in which the raid encounters can be categorized: the damage (or DPS[106]) race; movement; spacing; add[107] rush or management; split groups; healing intensive; gimmicks or mechanics; and avoiding the 'fire' being the most commonly repeating elements. Descriptions and examples of these elements are provided in the following table (*see* table 7.1 below). While the table provides an example of a boss fight where one such element takes place and some fights are more clearly defined or identified by a particular categorization, boss fights are rarely represented by just that one component and instead include some or many of these aspects and many coinciding simultaneously. For the raiding team,

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[106] There are analysis tools a raider can install on their computer to give them information about how much damage they are causing per second and overall during a particular boss fight encounter. Figure 7.9 (*see* page 291) provides an example of one piece of damage tracking software.

[107] An 'add' is an additional creature summoned or generated by the raid boss or raid encounter to cause additional damage to the raid group and/or to provide bonuses to the raid boss (some adds will heal the boss during a fight, for example). A boss may summon or create multiple types of adds causing different types of adverse damage or effects during the fight if they are not dealt with. Their appearance can often mean that the raid group needs to refocus their attention away from damaging the boss to removing, reducing, or distracting the adds.

anticipating, reacting and responding to these different obstacles determines the team's ability to win over the boss, it allows their enactment of gamic competition. I will draw out a few examples of gamic competition from the following table to explore gamic competition in more depth.

Table 7.1			
Boss fight element	**Description**	**Example(s) of a boss fight where this features prominently (boss name and raid instance)[108]**	**Description of the event**
The DPS race	The DPS race relates to how fast or effectively you can damage the boss, usually in a set period of time (before the boss enrages[109] or to enable a transition to another phase of the fight).	Beth'tilac, Firelands	The boss deals increasing amounts of damage and must be killed before raid is unable to cope with it.
Movement	Movement is where a group or members of the group has to move either in response to or anticipation of a particular boss effect; movement can also be controlled or restricted.	Ragnaros, Firelands	One third of the fight area is set on fire by Ragnaros and the raid team must move away from that area.
Spacing	Spacing is where the group has to remain spread apart or specifically positioned at some point of the fight or during the fight.	Majordomo Executus, Firelands	Whenever too many or too few people are standing together a certain phase of the fight starts. This needs to be done in a controlled manner.

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[108] All referenced and discussed boss encounters in this chapter and other chapters are, as applicable, the Heroic Modes of these fights unless noted otherwise. I have opted to orient the discussion about the Heroic Modes as the orientation toward competition is generally most contested by groups that are in a 'race' to clear all of the game content, including the most complicated game challenges.

[109] A 'boss enraging' means that at a certain point in the fight (at five or ten minutes after starting the fight, for example) the boss becomes far more powerful than before and is usually capable of quickly killing everyone (often called 'wiping') in the raid group.

Table 7.1			
Boss fight element	**Description**	**Example(s) of a boss fight where this features prominently (boss name and raid instance)**[108]	**Description of the event**
Add rush or management	A strategy employed by the raiding group to eliminate or control the adds that may appear during a boss fight.	Beth'tilac, Firelands	Several different types of adds need to be killed. Certain types are prioritised over others.
Split groups	These are fights where the group has to break into subgroups to handle specific elements (geographical or mechanical) or to avoid a negative outcome of the fight.	Conclave of Wind, Throne of the Four Winds	The raid is split on three platforms far from each other, each platform having one of the three bosses of the encounter.
Healing intensive	These types of boss fights requires that the group intensively manage the health of the group and/or remove negative effects (debuffs) from raid group members.	Chimaeron, Blackwing Descent	A debuff present in the fight changes the way healing works radically.
Gimmicks/mechanics	These represent elements of a fight where the group has to manage a boss-specific action, object, or event. These mechanics are often unique in nature to that particular boss.	Lord Rhyolith, Firelands	The movement of boss is controlled by hitting either the left or the right foot of the boss. Entire raid needs to do this in a controlled manner.

Table 7.1			
Boss fight element	**Description**	**Example(s) of a boss fight where this features prominently (boss name and raid instance)**[108]	**Description of the event**
Avoid 'fire'	Element where the raid group has to avoid the impact of a harmful localised (or area wide) event in the raid area such as fire, meteor, trap, tornado, blizzard, and so on. **Note:** This does not apply simply to 'fire' but to any harmful impact that hits a particular geographical area of the raid encounter.	Ragnaros, Firelands	Several different types of fires need to be avoided. Static fires on ground, moving lava waves and fires that cover big sections of the fight area.

Table 7.1. Representations of gamic competition in the raid encounter

The previous categories, as listed in table 7.1 above, represent ways in which gamic competition can occur during the raid encounter, and the majority of these encounters involve a combination of complex activities. As of the summer of 2011, the boss named Ragnaros the Firelord (represented in figure 7.1 below) was the end boss in the Firelands raiding area (the final and typically seen as the hardest boss in the raiding instance). In the case of Ragnaros, he was designed to be the final boss in the instance (and thus intended to be the most difficult) and in this case was also regarded by raiders as the hardest as well. I'll briefly use him as a means of illustrating the ways in which gamic competition is exhibited during a single raid encounter. As a lengthy and complex raid encounter (lasting approximately 15 minutes in length[110]) a number of categories of gamic competition (as included in the table above) emerge during this fight to challenge

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[110] This is considered a long duration for a raid encounter. Most successful fights last under ten minutes in duration, often speeding up in duration when the group's skill and ability begins to match or exceed that of the raid encounter. As a result, the duration of the fight—either short or long—can be a category where gamic competition is experienced.

the raiding group: the need to avoid fires; requirement to manage the rush of any adds that appear during the various phases of the fight; a need to move in a specific way at different times during the fight; handling of the fight's mechanics or gimmicks; and an escalation of the need for efficient and timely damage (DPS) being dealt on the boss in order to progress through the fight. This combination of elements works in concert to challenge the group and give the fight its difficulty. After being the first guild worldwide to kill Ragnaros (on July 19, 2011), Paragon posted its strategy on its Web site, 'Ragnaros 25-man heroic mode strategy guide'[iii], of which some is excerpted below (in table 7.2) and mapped to the categories listed above. I have added my own emphasis in italics below for the purposes of illustration.

Figure 7.1. Image of Ragnaros the Firelord, King of Fire Elementals, the final boss of the Firelands (released June 2011) raid instance.

[iii] http://www.paragon.fi/guides/ragnaros-25-man-heroic-mode-strategy-guide. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

Table 7.2	
Overview of the phases	**Raid fight element**
Overall note on fight: The boss has *4 phases and 2 intermissions* between them.	
Phase 1 (100%–70%) is about not dying and *syncing the Magma Trap explosions* with Ragnaros' other abilities *[such as World in Flames and Sulfuras smash]*.	• Avoid 'fires' • Movement
The first intermission is *about killing Sons of Flame before they reach Ragnaros' hammer.*	• Add rush or management
Phase 2 (70%–40%) is about *handling Molten Seeds and killing the Molten Elementals* that spawn.	• Add rush or management • Movement • Avoid 'fires'
The second intermission is *the same as the first one with the addition of Lava Scions* that need to be tanked.	• Add rush or management
Phase 3 (40%–10%) is all about *burning Ragnaros down to 10%* before too many meteors spawn.	• DPS race • Add rush or management • Movement • Avoid 'fires'
Phase 4 is when Ragnaros gets up from the lava *and unleashes the most devious abilities upon the raid. Malfurion Stormrage (Cloud Burst), Hamuul Runetotem (Roots) and Cenarius (Breadth of Frost) come to aid the raid* and make the kill possible with their abilities.	• Movement • Avoid 'fires' • Mechanics/gimmicks

Table 7.2. Phases of the Ragnaros raid boss fight.

In fights as long as the Ragnaros encounter, raid groups will often describe the fight in terms of phases. Each phase typically has its own challenges to overcome and the difficulty will often escalate during each progressive phase. In the case of Ragnaros, the group has to face and deal successfully with the challenges presented in four phases before the boss can be defeated. Each phase represents an escalation in complexity and difficulty. This escalation of intensity, combined with the variety of elements the boss forces the group to cope with, creates a kind of competitive gamic event that typifies raid encounters.

Thus gamic competition and its representation through the *player vs. game environment* (PVE) play experience becomes central to the experience of a raid.

Each raid encounter—presuming the level of the raid matches the level of the players—is designed to have a winner and loser. The winner can be the game-designed 'boss' (the significantly complicated foe designed for the group to defeat) or the winner can be the group, and the potential for loss exists for the players and the game itself. This built-in construct of winning over losing spurs on the motivation to compete against the game itself to win or improve and is of importance to raiders and often predominates at least their early perception of the raid if not their ongoing predilection for it. Raegx's comments below suggest this:

> Competition was my prime motivational factor to raid when I first started raiding. I wanted to be better and be the best. (Raegx, Blood Legion guild, email interview, March 2011)

Raegx identifies competition as his 'prime motivational factor' for raiding. And Raegx also associates his earlier interest in raiding with the experience of being competitive. This reflects the earlier comments of Prue and Fixation who also connect the desire to compete to the attraction to raiding. And beyond the idea of being competitive being a motivation for raiding, the idea of success as a raider is also linked to competition. For raider Kruf, member of WoW's most successful raiding guild, being competitive is integral to success:

> Being competitive is probably the most important factor [to being successful as a raider]. (Kruf, Paragon guild, IRC interview, January 2011)

But this is not limited to the experience of a raider like Kruf who happens to raid in a high-ranking guild, as demonstrated by Rebs' comments below, which almost directly restate Kruf's comments. Rebs' guild, Bridgeburners, is lower ranked than Kruf's guild, Paragon, by approximately 400 places, but its members appear no less oriented toward competition than the higher ranked guild:

> Having a competitive attitude in a raiding environment I think is required to be really successful. (Rebs, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

Kruf and Rebs's statements hint at the individual competitive relationship and attitude toward the game environment itself that is representative of another element of gamic competition: the individual raider's competitive attitude driving his or her successful navigation of the game-designed challenges. This

orientation toward gamic competition—so integral to the design and perpetuation of raiding—suggests that competition is indispensable to raiding gameplay. This kind of overriding construct, designed into the game itself, is also explored and represented through the ways that the individual raider and raiding groups interact with the gaming community and other raiding groups, expressed through the experience of external competition. This will be considered in the next section.

External competition in raiding

Competitiveness does not just exist within the narrative of the gamic environment (as a diegetically designed element of the game); it also exists within the priorities of the raiders themselves and the raiding guilds to which they belong, depending on how they choose to orient their gameplay. The experience of the external in competition, where the raider concentrates on his or her group's performance against other groups is probably most commonly associated with competition, particularly in areas like games or sports. Some competitive sports or hobbies might track competitive progress between teams and even provide prizes for the winners of any set contest. This idea of levels and expressions of competition is also represented in WoW raiding, partly by the mechanics of the game itself and by the raiding community's intentional design and creation. The game has external competition that exists on global, regional and server wide levels. One way this is managed and communicated is via player-created and maintained tracking sites (discussed later in this chapter) that allow raiders to track rankings. Another method of tracking the progress of raiding groups in WoW is through game achievements (a point-awarded announcement given through game mechanics in recognition of completing specific tasks, activities, or events in the game) awarded by the game mechanics for 'server firsts' as far as raiding completions go.

With a subscription base of approximately 10 million[112], WoW designers manage its large gaming community by creating multiple, simultaneously running game servers. These servers are set in different geographical regions and across different languages (English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Korean, Portuguese, Italian and Chinese). Server populations can range from approximately two thousand to over twenty thousand level 90 characters. Each server can have its own community and the external competition between guilds on the same server (or 'realm') can be important to guilds—where their ability to be the first on a server to complete a raid instance is highly contested and can generate a feeling of pride. An external orientation toward competition is where a raider or raiding group orients its enjoyment of playing and perception of success in relation to how they perform against other groups. This can be a strong driving factor in why certain raiders engage in the game activity or why they maintain their raiding commitment. This is suggested by Thifyx's comments below.

> Personally I'm more focused on external competition. Being in the position to achieve realm firsts is something I absolutely love and thus realm and world rankings are something I check often. (Thifyx, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

Thifyx here suggests that his focus and orientation toward the external progress of his own guild and those higher ranked than his own guild are of great importance ('I absolutely love') to him and his gameplay approach, even to the point where he will prioritise checking the status of 'world rankings' or his personal aim to achieve 'realm firsts' for his guild.

That sense of a race, or rivalry, between guilds can help encourage these forms of external competition on many levels. Taralish, member of the same guild as Thifyx, reinforces this concept by exploring her own value of her guild's progress on that game server and the race with other guilds that might help prioritise her orientation toward external competition.

> I like to keep track of the server progress and how we relate to the rest. I have kinda grown used to us being number one, so it's easy to become too complacent

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[112] Source: http://wow.joystiq.com/2012/02/09/world-of-warcraft-subscriber-numbers/. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

in a sense. Tracking what's happening with the other guilds on the server helps to get a sense of urge and keep the progress going. I like to think we all wake up a little when someone gets close or gets a server first instead of us. I do not look at other servers to compare our progress, but it is fun when you get a blue ranking (a top 500 kill) instead of a green one. (Taralish, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

Taralish raises the notion of tracking, or following, the progress of raiding guilds. Paying attention to how your rivals perform (by either surpassing or being surpassed by other guilds) spurs her on with a 'sense of urge' that keeps her and her guild 'going'.

Rivalry, whether intentioned or not, can function in two specific ways in WoW raiding: *between raiding guilds* which is an expression of external competition, and that which is experienced *between individuals,* which will be explored later in this chapter when I explore internal competition. Between raiding guilds, rivalry is exhibited in different ways, at times contentious and at others friendly. This expression of rivalry can sometimes be dictated by the pace of raiding progression, such as when new content has been released and the world's top guilds are racing against each other to eliminate a new raid boss first. I explore this in more depth (see pages 295–308) where I recount the experiences of top tier raiding and the 'race for world first'. Friendly rivalry is expressed through teasing or a joking banter between members of particular guilds and often happens during the lulls between raiding progress races, while a more contentious rivalry is usually reserved for those times when there is a contested race such as during the 'progress race' of new raiding content. Within a game server, rivalry often expresses itself in the race between the top few guilds on that server to gain 'server first' achievements both in raiding and in other guild or related activities. This rivalry can also be expressed as a kind of respect and acknowledgement of being 'out-performed' by a guild. These races are often understated or informally expressed as the rivalry that exists is not a specifically designed mechanic of WoW but more a community-driven interest that often comprises a significant amount of focus on the part of raiders. Rivalry in external competition between raiding guilds is often enacted through the 'raiding race' between the highest

ranked guilds and is well captured in the account of the raiding guild Method on pp. 295–308.

Exploring the 'raiding race' as an expression of external competition

External competition in raiding is also oriented toward the public display of results and achievements in the form of community or guild Web sites, forums, and video posting sites. The role and function of the technical in the expression of external competition is notable for its integral nature. These expressions or displays of achievement—almost always designed and driven by the raiding community itself—provide an important support for the provision of external competition. Tracing these technically oriented expressions of accomplishment and achievement can help situate the expression (and its permanence) of the external in raiding.

Competition is captured and expressed in a number of ways in raiding, including its visual representation. For example, its user interface not only enables play but also provides the means through which raiding groups can capture their play activity and express it externally to demonstrate skill, ability, and to validate their accomplishments and wins. An example of this is represented below (figure 7.2), where Paragon uploaded—five days after they won the worldwide race to be the first group to kill the Lich King in 'hard mode'—the 3-part video of their successful kill.
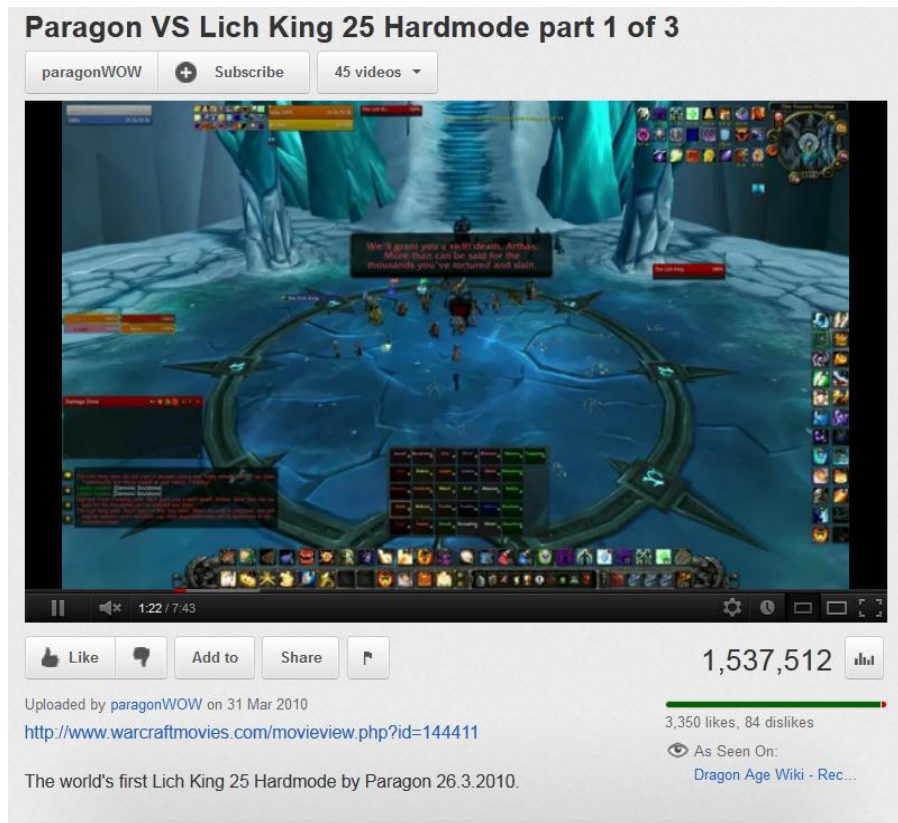
Figure 7.2. Example of uploaded captured video footage of Paragon's world first kill of the Lich King, March 26, 2010. Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh7kQkQkLik. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

There are a few noteworthy elements to consider in this example. First under the Video is the reference to the group's accomplishment and claim, 'the world's first'. By uploading a video displaying their supremacy over other guilds, Paragon overtly points to both their success and their signification of external competition. This early in the progress race, unlike the availability of example videos and raiding strategies that are widely available for many boss kills, there were no other videos on a successful Lich King kill up until this date. The only raiders who had seen the full fight to completion were members of Paragon. So while this display of accomplishment is an expression of external competition, it is also regarded an early example of a 'how to'. The other noteworthy element is the '3 povs' (points of view) that are demonstrated in the video. This not only allows the viewer to experience the fight from the perspective of one raider but gives multiple perspectives, thus enhancing the display of skill and accomplishment on the part of the raiding group and projecting this video as a demonstrational tool. These videos are also uploaded and displayed in a controlled and intentional manner. In the summer 2011, during the contested

raiding race, Paragon killed the last boss, Ragnaros, on July 19, 2011, but according to a post by member xenophics on its Web site, it would not be releasing the video until at least one other raiding guild (in this case, Method) had also killed the boss,

> ...we want to respect the race by not releasing anything related to our strategy before world second kill. This means we won't publish the kill video, tactics guide, meters, or Bigwigs mods just yet, but we'll do that in the future.[113]

This desire to 'respect the race' is a telling statement. It suggests not only the significance of these nonhuman actors—the videos, tactics guides, and so on—to external competition among raiding groups, but also emphasizes the importance of the race itself to these raiding guilds. After the second world kill of Ragnaros by Method on July 26, 2011, Paragon then uploaded their video on July 27, 2011.[114] Their intention to 'respect the race' was demonstrated by the restraint in uploading the video, which has, as of this writing, been viewed almost 780,000 times.

Another significant expression of external competition is the use of, monitoring, and engagement with Web sites that track guild raiding progress. This form of external competition is made available through the provision of player-designed and run Web sites, often self-described as 'unofficial'[115] ranking sites. A number of external Web sites and processes of monitoring have been introduced into World of Warcraft and raiding that allow and help perpetuate the enjoyment of the gameplay experience. These sites will show rankings of guilds on different scales and levels of play; this includes server-specific rankings or gamewide rankings and group size rankings (showing raid completion in 25-player or 10-player sizes).

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[113] http://www.paragon.fi/news/so-boss-dead-what-now. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[114] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ez1pR01sywY. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

[115] Unofficial here is commonly used by these Web site administrators to describe their sites as their tracking process is set up by applying algorithms to the game and its official game Web sites (such as Blizzard's armoury—the Web site that tracks player and group activity in the game) to draw its tracking information but has not been officially sanctioned or released by the game designer itself.

Currently there are a number of 'unofficial' tracking sites commonly utilized by raiders: *wowprogress.com, guildox.com,* and *wowtrack.org.* These sites use slightly different tracking processes and present the tracking information in different ways, but the primary goal is to provide information on the progress of raiding groups within the game. For the most successful raiding guilds, raiding progress is often checked frequently during the 'progress race'. While at times debated or questioned as far as their validity or accuracy, these sites are relied on quite heavily by raiders to determine their own group's status as well as the status of other guilds. Most will use the information on the site to support their orientation toward External competition, be it local server based rankings, raiding group size rankings, or overall global gamewide rankings. The following figures (figures 7.3–7.5) are screenshots of how these rankings are posted on the top three ranking sites. Discussion and exploration of their visual representation and data arrangement follows.

Figure 7.3. Example of WoWProgress.com's rankings of raiding guilds. Ranking is based on the first kill of the final and most different boss in the latest raid instance.

In the case of figure 7.3 above, wowprogress.com, widely considered the most popular ranking site, the ranking is listed according to the order in which groups have killed the last boss in the latest raiding instance (in the case of this example, Ragnaros). This does not distinguish between 10- and 25-player raiding guilds,

though many raiders interested in external competition—particularly those competing in the larger raid group size—will tend to prefer to follow the progress of one type of group, namely their own raid group size.

Figure 7.4. Example of guildox.com's raiding progress site, ranking guilds by a point system that gives points for all (seven) bosses killed in the heroic mode of raiding.

Figure 7.4 represents the guildox Web site, which, like wowprogress shows the default listing of progress for both 10-player and 25-player raiding combined, while the actual rankings differ slightly from wowprogress. This is due to the way in which the ranking site opts to calculate and weigh the significance of each kill and the timeliness of each kill. What makes sites like these potentially problematic is that their data and information are designed using different algorithmic priorities. Each tracking site's designer has created an algorithm that allows for a determination on ranking based on either when the raiding guild has killed the final boss or how quickly the guild killed all of the bosses preceding it or some combination thereof. The third prominent tracking site (see figure 7.5), wowtrack.org, differs from the other two sites in that it does distinguish between the two sizes of raiding groups.

Figure 7.5. Example of the wowtrack.org ranking site, which delineates between 10- and 25-player raiding groups for its ranking.

These sites are not merely a way in which guilds can track their own progress or those of others. They create a historical record of progress completed, any shifts and changes in the raiding community, any changes implemented by the game's designers, and project a numerically and data-driven means by which guilds can display their external competitive success and orientation. These also function as recruitment avenues, allowing competitive raiders, hoping to move up in their rankings, to establish connections with new guilds or for guilds to demonstrate their success in the provision of external competition in order to attract new raiding members. (The function of recruitment in the formation of raiding groups was explored in Chapter 5.) These multifaceted forms of redistributed action (Latour, 2011) transform these sites from being mere data sharing sources to a kind of dispersing network within the experience of competition, aiding in generating, tracking and compiling information.

Internal competition in raiding

Internal competition emerges when raiders are oriented toward the actions of their fellow raiding group members. Though internal competition is less openly or formally tracked or discussed as compared to gamic or external competition, many raiders admit to at least aiming to excel against those who are playing with

each other, aiming for the best among those who play similar roles in the raid group. Internal competition is often understated or more cordially expressed. A competitively minded healing paladin might compare his or her output to other healers using a game add-on that tracks how much healing each healer does during the boss fight. The action of raiding and combat is defined, in part, by the numerical—the numerical value of a healing spell, damage dealt, blows taken by the tanks. (See figure 7.6 as an example of this expression of the numerical in the gamic action of the raid.) This value is seen, quite literally, as valuable, and is one way for raiders to measure their performance against each other. While the enactment of internal competition is not as openly expressed as the other ways that competition exists in the raiding community, but for raiders this is also a widely expressed approach to competition. This internal enactment of competition can take different forms: to motivate performance improvement of members of the group; a kind of friendly rivalry between similarly skilled or equipped players; or an incentive for effective group performance.

Figure 7.6. An example of a raider's screen (Mezzy) with its attributes of the visual, textual, and numerical. Numbers are dispersed across the screen in different ways, performing different functions. Even the colours of the numbers indicate relevant information for the individual raider and helps form an expression of the internal competitive experience.

In the following excerpts, members from the same raiding guild describe how they utilize internal competition within their guild or within each raiding group.

> There is definitely some competition between the people in the guild. We always log our fights and use those WoL[116] logs as a tool when we are wiping a lot or want to analyse dps/trialists or applicants. However, we don't run with addons which announce fail during raids. Whenever someone screws up people usually comment on it in a general way. (Taralish, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

In Taralish's experience, the competition appears nurtured or enabled between guild members and she asserts that its function is intended to assess and monitor new applicants ('trials') or damage done ('dps'). World of Logs (WoL) is widely used in raiding groups, with raiders being able to monitor each other's output or for groups to analyse success and failure during a raid. Figures 7.7 and 7.8 are examples of the visual WoL report that is generated by raid groups using the software. In the case of the Bridgeburners guild, these WoL reports are collected during each raid night (four times a week) and displayed on the guild's Web site for raiders to view and compare directly following each raid. When viewing the WoL report a kind of complex dashboard of data, graphics and numbers appears. It provides a visual representation of performance and movement, of action and inaction. Numerical values, percentages and timelines compare and track the failures (figure 7.7) and successes of each raid and information such as 'damage done' indicate (figure 7.8) which player in the raid was the most successful at producing damage. This kind of tracking device is indicative of how a group may track its own progress and enables the practice of internal competition as manifested through the technical. Tracing the movement provides a visual measure of progress, both on the individual and group level.

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[116] WoL = World of Logs, a logging software that allows raid groups (through one raider's computer) to collect all data relating to a particular raid fight encounter or series of encounters, 'World of Logs combat log analyser which allows gamers to save, share and analyse their raiding experiences conveniently and thoroughly in World of Warcraft.' (*Source:* http://www.worldoflogs.com.)

Figure 7.7. This figure represents the first page of a WoL, giving an overall report on the 4 hour raiding session. *Source:* World of Logs, Bridgeburners guild.

Figure 7.8. More detailed WoL report depicting hierarchy of damage done, from highest amount of overall DPS. *Source:* World of Logs, Bridgeburners guild.

This kind of orientation toward the constant observation and distribution of information about the performance and ranking of members perpetuates this inclination toward internal competition. While WoW's UI and graphical display has always provided some limited information on an individual player's performance on any given game activity involving combat, these types of visual and data-driven methods of tracking performance down to the hundredths of a percent emerged over time in WoW raiding and may have contributed toward this notion and expression of competition between members of a raiding group.

Again, like the use of the technical that perpetuates and help disperse the entities involved in expressing external competition in raiding, the use of data tracking and sharing software may have a contributory impact on the predilection of raiders toward internal competition. This notion of an awareness and identification of the value of internal competition as a benchmark for suitability for guild membership, as in the usage of data and information on internal guild raiding performance, is well expressed in my discussion with Fentality, guild leader of Imperium:

> **Ladan:** Explain why you guys like to see a WoL log in your application.
> **Fentality:** Well, we like to check people's logs as it really is the truest way to determine if someone is getting the most out of their class or if they show promise. (discussion with Fentality, Imperium guild, Skype text, October 2011)

And the idea of the value and function of the internal in raiding game play is further expressed by the raiders below, particularly in relation to their acknowledgement of competition between members of the group and how rivalry might function within the group:

> There is always competition between guild members, always wanting to be top. It doesn't always show, but its always there. Internal competition is what pushes people to become that little bit better at what they do. I believe its very healthy for a guild to have internal competition. (Rebs, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

> I would not go to the extent that we have huge rivalry within the guild, aside from the dps always trying to top each other on the meters. I guess while we are levelling up during new content there are always those that compete to get heroic dungeons cleared first, but it is more of an unspoken race to the hills than

> something worth flaunting in public. We have the same approach to raiding as a guild, where we aspire to be the realm first, but still keeping it to ourselves. (Prue, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

> Guild competition? Hell yeah! Even if it's not openly expressed, you're usually trying to better yourself against the other players in your role. (Fixation, Bridgeburners guild, text interview, March 2011)

For Prue and Rebs internal competition 'doesn't always show' or is an 'unspoken race to the hills'. Fixation is more open about the competitive atmosphere within a raiding guild, though he also accedes that it is not 'openly expressed'. That kind of quiet, suggestively cordial rivalry appears well represented in the raiding environment and for raiders like Prue, this kind of rivalry may exist but he views a public display of this form of internal competition as inappropriate. And while the experience of internal competition may be less overtly stated, it is still seen as crucial to the betterment of players; Rebs goes as far as suggesting that this kind of internal competition is 'healthy' for raiding guilds. The notion of health suggests a kind of viability and life-fullness that ensures a guild's longevity and success.

In addition to the use of WoL for post-raid session performance and data analysis, raiders often use in-game damage and healing meters that track data during the raiding activity. These meters can be displayed on the raider's playing screen (such as the examples below, figures 7.9 and 7.10). That friendly rivalry between raiders is often based on who did more damage during a particular fight. It can also be used, however, to rate performance and effectiveness of raiders. These meters do not come without a degree of controversy or hindrance, however. It is not uncommon for raiders to be instructed to stop focusing on topping the meters in lieu of performing specific raiding tasks to ensure a successful completion of the game's objectives. This is an instance where the objectives of gamic competition—to win against the game-designed foe—and internal competition—to win against one's fellow raiders—could come into direct conflict and result in failure for the group.

Figure 7.9. Damage meter example. This software allows raiders to track damage (by totals, damage per second [dps] or percentages).

Figure 7.10. Healing meter example. This is software to allows raider (and the leaders of the group) to monitor active healing.

Internal competition is not always seen as a subtle, less overt experience by raiders, however. In the case of a guild like Paragon, the most successful raiding guild in WoW, farming raids[117] are often a time where internal competition is

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[117] Farming raids are raiding activity where the raiding group has already previously killed every raid boss successfully and now returns, primarily, to the area to re-kill the bosses in order to collect items and gear off of the bosses to help improve the performance and gear of raid members (generally in preparation for the next new raiding area).

widely contested, particularly in relation to 'winning' valuable items that would ordinarily be divvied out in a more egalitarian fashion.

> My first raid in paragon we were 4 trials in the raid, and when we were about to start Sejta announced that the winner of overall damage for the whole instance would get all the boe[118] epics and saronites.... The effectiveness of that raid, or all raids in general, was so stunning compared to my last guild I was well out of running before the first boss. (Manni, Paragon guild, IRC interview, February 2011)

Manni indicates a direct correlation between the raiders competing against each other to top the 'overall damage' for the evening and effectiveness in raiding. This is an expression of how rivalry is enacted through the lens of internal competition. This form of internal competition, as presented by the guild's leader, Sejta, is an overt expression of the internal, as opposed to the more subtle and understated observation of internal competition that may typify other raiding guild's experience with competition. As traced through the comments and observations of the raiders themselves, internal competition functions to permit, encourage, and facilitate individual improvement, a friendly (and sometimes unfriendly) rivalry among players, and to assess performance of members. It can also be utilized to garner rewards and an improved reputation within the raiding group.

Summarising competition

Competition is a meaningful expression of game play among raiders in the persistent game environment; it represents the way that raiders want to play. Oftentimes, just as the complexity of diegetic and non-diegetic forms of gamic action overlap in the MMO, these forms of competition are not expressed in isolation. Internal, external, and gamic competition all function simultaneously, as the comments of Manni imply. The ability of Manni's guild to compete amongst themselves (internal) to win rewards, thus enhancing the quality and effectiveness of the group's performance against the game-designed content

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[118] BOE, 'bind on equip', are game items (usually gear or items that can be worn on players) that only bind to the player once equipped and thus can be transferred between players, thus able to be sold for in-game cash. These can be quite valuable depending on the difficulty of the boss and level of the item. These differ from the bind on pick-up (BOP) items that cannot be transferred and bind instantly to the player once picked up.

(gamic), which resulted in this new member of Paragon (Manni) discerning a superior performance of this new guild as compared to his previous raiding experience (external). With competition taking many different forms and being facilitated by the use of various technical elements such as the in-game software or tracking Web sites, its pervasive impact supports Kruf's earlier opinion that being competitive is essential to raiding success. And while all the forms of competition function simultaneously, how players engage with competition can vary according to the idea of specificity, for example, as was discussed in Chapter 6. Meaning that while raiders may exhibit an orientation toward all forms of competition, some groups might place external competition (competing against other guilds) as their primary orientation, another group or player might prioritize gamic competition (competing against the game content). Yet regardless of which form of competition predominates the raiders' gameplay orientation, these expressions of competition distinguish raiders from the more casual or solo-oriented player of WoW who may not engage in raiding gameplay. The following section explores this idea of how the experience of competition (with its overlapping forms of expression and enactment) manifests itself through the gamic, external and internal when the race between raiding guilds is its most contested and overtly stated: the race for 'world first' and where, while all forms of competition are expressed, the predominating competition orientation is toward the external. I will first provide a short analysis of the overall race and then concentrate on tracing competition through the 2nd ranked raiding guild, Method. Studying competition through this particular case study is effective for two reasons: it portrays how the three forms of competition can intersect during raiding gameplay and it depicts the degree to which competition matters to raiders.

Tracing competition through the raiding race to 'world first'

When considering the varied ways in which the competitive aspect of raiding is expressed in WoW, for some groups achieving the distinction of 'world first' is the primary driving force behind continuing to raid and belonging to particular groups. It's not enough to achieve local success by topping the rankings of an

individual server, or even regional success as the top raiding guild in a particular geographical region (such as topping the German servers or being the best among the North American servers), these guilds want to win the worldwide race.

I decided to follow the global race for 'world first' rankings closely throughout 2011, since the launch of the latest game expansion 'Cataclysm'. I considered the broader perspective of the race and its main contenders, but I also focused in on the experiences of one particular guild, Method. Any new raiding content wipes the slate clean, so to speak, so that any guild that is able to kill a boss first can assure itself of top global ranking. Previous success is not factored into the new stage of the raiding competition and progression and does not grant those raiding teams any preferential bonuses as far as the ranking sites go. For example, a comparison of the shifts in rankings from 'tier 12' raiding (as listed in figure 7.3 on page 283) to figure 7.11 below indicates the shifts in rankings over time.

Figure 7.11. Raiding progress rankings from the December 2010-January 2011 *tier 11* raiding progress period.

Some dropped out of the listed top 9 entirely and others moved up into it. The most significant improvements were Envy and Inner Sanctum moving up from their 23rd and 27th rankings during the tier 11 race, respectively, to 3rd and 6th place, while Tsunami/Adept fell from its 9th ranked spot in tier 11 to the rank of 67th (under the new name Suit Up) after some movement to a new game server and a merging with another raiding guild. This kind of shuffling suggests that the global rankings can and do shift, but that in general these changes do not vary significantly between tiers. This indicates that these top ranked guilds are oriented toward 'winning the race' and have been able to sustain success, even if it means dropping some ranks down, over time. Considering the fact that as of this writing, the tracking Web site wowprogress.com, notes that over 40,000 raiding groups (the majority of which are 10-player groups) have killed at least one boss in the newest tier of raiding content, guilds achieving a ranking in the top 50 or even 100 represent a level of competitive achievement and pursuit that the vast majority of raiding guilds may not aspire to themselves (or even be able to accomplish). Often referred to as 'elite' raiding guilds, their organizational structure and strategic orientation is often quite distinctive from the serious but more casual guilds or the intermittent raiding guilds. The following section directly traces the experience of competition for an elite raiding guild as exemplary of the ways in which competition is enacted within raiding.

'The saddest world second ever': The experience of competition in play

> *Second place is just the first place loser.*—Dale Earnhardt
>
> *I'm not jealous, I'm just tired of being in second place.* —Unknown

These quotes evoke a cynicism that sometimes accompanies a reaction to a competitor coming in second place. For the second place 'loser' who might reiterate the feelings stated above, there is no other aspiration than coming in first. This anti-climactic experience of coming in second is well expressed through the enactment of competition at its many levels—gamic, external and internal—is well expressed when tracing the experience of one of these guilds. The story of Method is particularly significant as it also explores their competitive

crisis over a several-month period as they attempted, and failed, to move from their second place spot in the global progress rankings to first place. In this account, I will first lay the groundwork for the competitive attitude and orientation of a guild like Method based around the discussions we had during a group interview that took place in May 2011; then recount the raiders' experiences that they themselves recorded from the VOIP sessions conducted during their actual raiding activity in July 2011 where they attempted to win the race against Paragon; and then finally explore the reflections through raider-driven account of the entire race during a group discussion in September 2011. During these discussions the raiders were engaged and active participants in exploring and expressing their own experience with competition, and thus played a significant role in delineating its meaningful impact on shaping raiding gameplay.

This orientation toward competition, as expressed through the guild's motivation and desire to achieve an overall world first ranking, is a driving factor for some raiders in relation to membership in Method. In fact, competition on all levels appears almost intensified in its expression by these highly competitive raiders. For Shakaroz, a raiding member of Method, two key factors have kept his interest in raiding:

> What keeps me raiding right now is the promise of beating paragon next progress and the commitment I have made to the other guild members. (Shakaroz, Method guild, Skype text interview, October 2011)

For Shakaroz, the notion of 'beating paragon' with its overt affirmation of external competition is what keeps him raiding and is indicative of the external orientation toward raiding. This almost exclusive focus on the competitive goal of achieving a world first is indicative of the highly focused orientation of the elite raiding guild toward competition. And like other competitive raiding guilds, Method was formed by WoW raiding players that wanted to be the first to defeat the raiding content ahead of other guilds. This assertion is made clear on the guild's promotional material, where they solicit new members, the goal being, 'to be among the first to witness, participate in, and down new raid boss encounters.'[119]

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[119] http://www.wowprogress.com/guild/eu/xavius/Method. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

This degree of intentionality overtly states the guild's orientation toward both the gamic ('new boss encounters') and external ('be among the first') and may even appeal to a raider's notion of internal competition ('participate in').

Method's background and focus are quite typical of a lot of European-based raiding guilds that raid on the English language servers. During my first discussion with the Method guild—in a somewhat desultory group interview over Team Speak VOIP in May 2011—I first observed the linguistic and geographical diversity of the group. A European-English server raiding guild, Method consists of mostly European players located all across Europe[120]. This cultural, linguistic and geographical diversity of players, particularly across Europe, is fairly typical among English-European server raiding guilds.

Method's success as a world-ranked progression guild began in 2007 when it had the world second kill of Lady Vashj in a level 70 ranked raiding area called Serpentshrine Cavern. Its success continued off and on until it reached a more consistent level of prominence in 2009 during level 80 ranked raiding. It has sustained a world #2 ranking since December 2010. In fact, its history of being second is quite predominant for Method. On its self-written guild description posted on the wowprogress guild information page[121] (Method, 2011) it lists 31 achievements of 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place finishes on specific important game achievements over the past four years. Out of those 31 achievements, 22 (or 71%) are listed as second place finishes. This notion of seemingly perpetual runner-up-dom has not been lost on the guild or its members.

> **On not achieving first place:** 'It's the one thing Method hasn't done yet.' (Rogerbrown, Method guild, VOIP Interview, May 2011)

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[120] To be specific, the raiders I spoke with self-identified as Greek, Welsh, English, Scottish, Danish, Swedish, Polish, Romanian, Dutch, French, German, Finnish, Portuguese, Italian and Serbian.

[121] http://www.wowprogress.com/guild/eu/xavius/Method/rating.tier12_25. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

> **On losing the Majordomo kill to DREAM Paragon by 45 minutes:** 'The saddest world second ever.' (Rogerbrown, Method guild, VOIP recording TS, July 2011)

During my interview in May 2011, the sting of the lack of achievement of the world #1 during the tier 11 race (December 2010/January 2011) was palpable in the comments brought up by the members, but they were already looking ahead to the June/July 2011 Firelands (tier 12) race, as Sco, the guild's leader, laid a confident-sounding agenda for the next tier of raiding content.

> Our progress on this tier *[tier 11]* was good. It's quite high in regards to our previous finishes. And I feel like our roster since progress has gotten even stronger. Realistically achieving that top position has never been better for the guild. (Sco, Method guild, VOIP interview TS, May 2011)

The tier 11 progression raiding race was actively contested. According to wowprogress' ranking criteria, less than 600 points (out of a maximum of 42000 points possible) separated Method and Paragon from each other and only 5 days separated their completion of the raiding content. This is significant considering how long the actual race was (6 weeks) and the fact that more casual raiding guilds took an average of 5–6 months to completely clear the same content. In fact, the top four ranked guilds (DREAM Paragon, Method, Ensidia and For the Horde) were extremely close in the final rankings, with less than 900 points (out of a total 42,000) difference between them.

Progression racing is viewed as challenging, both by design and circumstance. It requires a lot of time, focus and speed, particularly if external competition is at stake. To illustrate this, over the 26 days that Method was clearing the raiding content, Valiane, one of the raiding members of Method, estimated that the raiding group spent approximately 200 hours working on clearing the content, with about 180 of those hours spent on the final raid boss, Ragnaros.[122] This works out to an average of 7.3 hours being spent raiding per day. While this kind of speed and concentrated time spent in raiding can contribute toward success in the progress race, it can also often present a series of unexpected events for the groups involved. One example is the situation where most of the top raiding

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[122] From Skype text interview with Valiane, October 2011.

guilds—due to the speed at which they progress through the content[123]—face the raiding content while Blizzard's game designers are still fixing bugs in the newly released game content. Members of Method pointed out how during progress raiding while one guild would get a boss down using one particular tactic but when they would try and use a similar approach it would not work because Blizzard had 'fixed' it between tries:

> The worst thing was when Paragon killed something and then afterwards it was fixed so no other guild could kill it using the same mechanics. (Trekkie, Method guild, VOIP interview, May 2011)

This experience of the top end guilds to have to cope with game designers making midstream adjustments to a boss fight has caused stress about this in different ways, with some occasionally blaming other guilds for 'questionable tactics or mechanics'[124] and others pointing to a flaw in the way the encounters get 'hotfixed' between attempts. When asked how this experience was for them and where they fell in the debate–it was clear that Method members found this more an issue with how game designers approach raid design and were not particularly inclined toward expressing negativity toward their raiding rivals. As one member pointed out,

> Of course when we're in the middle of progress we're a bit aggressive to each other because in the end we want to win. But afterwards, when you look at it and how it went, you don't really blame them—you can't blame them. (Shakaroz, Method guild, VOIP interview, May 2011)

The 'blame' of this guild member seemed more directed toward the way in which mechanics for encounters were changed right after they were used versus placing blame on the guild that beat them in the race or the other guild members they were playing with.

In July Method began its pursuit of the world first completion of the newest raiding content. During the discussion of how the Firelands race had gone,

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[123] For perspective, a more casually oriented raiding guild might take an additional two months or more of less intensive game play to reach the same bosses that a high-end, elite guild like Method might reach in 1-2 weeks.

[124] Method member, VOIP interview, May 2011.

Trekkie, a raiding member of Method, indicated that the primary area of concern was the perceived race between their guild and Paragon.

> Yes, pretty much only cared about Paragon's progress in the race. (Trekkie, Method guild, VOIP interview, September 2011)

This highly focused externally oriented competition is indicative of Method's desire to 'win the race' and surpass their long-held 2nd place spot. In fact, even during the 3 weeks of the contested race (until Paragon defeated Ragnaros on July 19, 2011), Method's interest was in their own raiding performance and tactics against the raiding challenges (gamic competition) but was also oriented toward the activities of Paragon (external). A unique feature of the raiding race as compared to other types of races (like a running race, for example) is how the progress takes place in veritable isolation. Without a streaming video or way to watch along while the guilds make their attempts, there is no easy way for anyone outside the raiding group to follow the details of a raiding effort. And with so many of these groups facing these boss fights with no pre-existing tactics or strategies made available elsewhere, groups are reluctant to allow the other teams to see what strategies are being attempted. And this is valued and fiercely protected by top ranked guilds. As Lazeil, raid leader and member of Paragon, states, 'That's the biggest thing I value: that we're going to new content that no one knows about.'[125] So theorizing about what other guilds might be attempting was a way that the guild was externally oriented while engaged in gamic competition. Shakaroz states that clearly here:

> You asked if what we knew about Paragon at that point *[during the raiding progress]* was affecting our raid? Yes, we knew their set up on Majordomo and I'm thinking it might have given us a feeling of security because we thought we knew what they were doing because at some point they swapped in like 7 to 9 rogues trying some weird strategy. So we were thinking they didn't really know what to do with this boss and they were trying all sorts of weird things and they are not close and that gives us that sense of security so that personal mistakes and poor play isn't really looked on as harshly because we think that we were further along than we were. With [Major]domo we could have taken the world first. We had some silly wipes and some time wasting. (Shakaroz, Method guild, VOIP interview, September 2011)

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[125] VOIP interview, September 2011.

So in effect here, while Shakaroz concedes that Method was externally oriented toward the progress and activity of Paragon, he felt it adversely affected their own guild's performance. Perhaps this highlights the ways in which a series of events can conspire to negatively impact a process (in this case a raiding guild) or respond to the dispersal of information. But this close focus on Paragon's progress is understandable considering how easily accessible data and information was for raiding guilds. In the table below (table 7.3), this information is drawn from the data provided on a raiding progress tracking Web site, such as wowprogress.

Table 7.3 Kill date and time comparison for Firelands			
DREAM Paragon		**Method**	
Boss	**Date killed**	**Boss**	**Date killed**
Ragnaros	**Jul 19, 2011 20:50**	*Ragnaros*	Jul 26, 2011 21:52
Majordomo	**Jul 8, 2011 01:17**	*Majordomo*	Jul 8, 2011 02:06
Baleroc	Jul 7, 2011 14:52	*Baleroc*	**Jul 7, 2011 04:42**
Alysrazor	Jul 6, 2011 15:54	*Alysrazor*	**Jul 6, 2011 13:37**
Lord Rhyolith	Jul 6, 2011 13:51	*Lord Rhyolith*	**Jul 6, 2011 11:07**
Beth'tilac	Jul 6, 2011 12:15	*Beth'tilac*	**Jul 6, 2011 10:04**
Shannox	Jul 6, 2011 10:11	*Shannox*	**Jul 6, 2011 08:52**

Table 7.3. Table depicting dates and times that Paragon and Method killed bosses in the Firelands instance (July 2011). Dates and times in red signify which guild got the kill first. *Source:* www.wowprogress.com.

Having access to such information, available to any raider or interested party, can help spur on the race and also motivate the teams involve to either pick up their pace or, possibly, relax with a false sense of security, such as what Shakaroz indicated above. While the significant part of the race did not come until the attempts on Ragnaros started, the momentum gained from speedily killing the earlier bosses gave the team a time advantage so they could focus on the final boss. A careful review of the dates and times of the boss kills shows a very close race. Mere hours separate the successful kills of the earlier bosses, with Method ahead of Paragon's progress until Majordomo. But the Majordomo fight was the

first indicator of a change in the race between the two guilds. It's worth pointing out here, however, that for guilds like Method and Paragon the race is not so much about the earlier six bosses but more about the final one. As North American servers get access to the game a day before European servers, for example, all of the first four heroic bosses had already been killed for the first time. But Method and Paragon quickly succeeded those early kills and began to progress to the last bosses.

For Method guild members, the penultimate boss fight proved a genuine test of their guild's orientation toward competition and actually allows for a compelling exploration of the three levels of competition as enacted in the contested raiding race. Majordomo took, according to Valiane's estimates, 71 tries before the group was able to defeat him. This is in a stark contrast to the estimated total of 23 tries on the first four bosses. Method determined a tactic early on that they knew would help them defeat the boss as long as it was executed properly.

> We had a strategy actually 4 hours before we actually killed it. Like every try was some kind of execution fail one after another. The second try we tried that tactic we got him down to like 30% or whatever and that's basically the whole fight. (Trekkie, Method guild, VOIP interview, September 2011)

But the 'execution fails' that the guild continued to experience were palpably frustrating in the VOIP recording of the progress attempts as the guild knew that every failure on their part meant that the now five-hour advantage they had on Paragon was being squandered away. Sco, the guild master, can be heard quietly but unrelentingly attempting to orient the group's focus back on reducing errors in execution to successfully defeat the boss, making what would be an almost prophetic statement:

> Ask yourself if you want to kill this boss before Paragon as we're playing like shit please. This boss is actually not that hard and I think you don't realise we're going to lose the world first on this fight. (Sco, Method guild, VOIP recording, July 2011)

An attempt to refocus appears audible on the recordings as the group recollects themselves after the latest raid wipe to start over again. This time the fight is as successful as they've been so far. Calm and controlled, members of the group call out information, others inform the group of their actions, some warn the group of

various gamic devices from the boss. (View the following video [video 7.1] to view an example of how this fight unfolds.)

Video 7.1. Sample footage of Method vs. Majordomo. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eh8rZZm_-ng. Last accessed November 24, 2012.

It appears to be going well; the boss' health, after a concerted and prolonged effort of about 8 minutes, has been diminished by well over 90%—the end appears nigh. The world first is theirs for the taking. The group sounds focused, oriented and animated. Instructions are handed out, encouragement is offered, and pleas are uttered[126]:

> *Nuke nuke, come on!*
>
> *Nuke please...!*
>
> *Come on...*
>
> *Oh nice nice...!*
>
> *Go go go go...!*

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[126] All of these excerpts (italicized) on pp. 303–305 are comments made by various members of Method on the VOIP recording, July 2011.

And then they wipe.

> ***1.4 million.. 0.4% wipe.***
>
> *Fuck, oh my God…*

> *1.4 million, that's oh my God…*

A 0.4% wipe translates to a fight where the group had managed to reduce the boss's health pool by 99.6% and only 0.4% remained. There is nothing closer than this. The group has failed. They must collect themselves, return to the raiding instance, and start again. General disappointment with the groups failure to master or exhibit the skill it knows it can, 'We almost don't deserve a world first with this play, honestly,' and an apparent inability to master Internal competition to succeed in the fight.

Another wipe. More silence as the members make their way back into the raid instance.

And then these simple words are uttered:

> *Paragon got it.*

> *Fuck.*

The VOIP channel, which had been quite active with various members of the 25-player group speaking until this point, goes silent for almost 1 minute. Considering the earlier activity level and the fact that failure and disappointment

weighs heavily on the group that minute feels longer. It is about 01:30 am and Paragon had only killed Majordomo a few minutes earlier. And then a singular voice is heard on the VOIP recording:

If we kill it this night it should still be fine.

This was in reference, I was later told, to the idea that if they can still kill Majordomo soon they would have about the same amount of time to work on Ragnaros, thus levelling the playing field for the final contest once more. The group must shake off their failure to defeat the game mechanics (gamic competition) and demoralized state over losing the world first (internal competition) on this boss to Paragon and concentrate on the goal of beating Paragon (external competition). Somehow this helps the group. They seem more focused, more oriented. It's not a perfect 'getting back on the horse', however. They have one more wipe. But by the time the group has collected for its second try since learning that Paragon has killed Majordomo, they are a somewhat more focused and energized group, although not quite exhibiting the animation as before. I hear a quieter, less animated discussion than I had heard earlier in the recording and then:

There he goes... come on...

It's berserk.. he's dead, he's dead.

Finally.

Fucking...

Good job, guys.

It's done.

The saddest world second ever.

It is. Indeed, indeed.

It is 02:09 am. Method has achieved the world second kill of Majordomo on heroic mode. The disappointment is palpable, the subdued reaction to the kill indicative of the guild's failure, at that moment, to achieve its external competitive goals. And when I asked Rogerbrown later why he felt this kill was the 'saddest world second ever' (as those were his words on that night in July), this was his explanation:

> Sad because obviously we could have got the kill before them and we had an advantage over Paragon. Not as big as it seemed in our heads, but we had at least 5 hours ahead of them to start with.. so we felt like we lost our chance there to get a world first and it was demoralizing. (Rogerbrown, Method guild, VOIP interview, September 2011)

So while the Majordomo fight was not the most contested fight in the Firelands race, it was the most disappointing for the guild. Rogerbrown's explanation as to why the fight had been so demoralising can be explicated from a perspective of lost advantage in the external competition: 'we lost our chance' and 'it was demoralizing'. As Paragon's successful killing of Ragnaros came a week before Method did it (see table 7.2 above), the guild acknowledged in that fight that they had been 'outplayed'. As Xabok, guild officer and raider in Method, explains:

> We were finishing our raid, we had just killed Ragnaros on normal mode and waiting on the nerfs. And the gear reset and Sco is like officers come down and we have a meeting and 5 minutes in Artzie comes in and says Paragon killed it and we're all like what the fuck because we just said the boss is impossible. So I was like, they did it or they cheated or we just got outplayed. And we waited on the movie and we were like, ok we got outplayed. (Xabok, Method guild, VOIP Interview, September 2011)

For the group, there is a state of acquiescence over the Ragnaros kill, it is less painful, less of a sting. Shakaroz, with over six weeks to think about the experience, offers the following analysis of their competitive experience in the raiding instance:

> It's like we won the first half of the instance. Against Baleroc we won against them but then they caught up with us at Majordomo. We went into Ragnaros being sort of equal, we had a point each and then it was the final showdown so I think we were, I was at least perceiving Paragon as equal to us at that point and when they killed the boss it really came as a shock to a lot of people because I didn't expect them to be able to kill it. And a lot of us were talking about Ragnaros being impassable and previously we had been talking about not raiding

> as much and waiting on nerfs, at least a phase 4 nerf so we could do it with 4 meteors. We did not expect Ragnaros to be killable at that point. (Shakaroz, Method guild, VOIP interview, September 2011)

And adding to that analysis, Rogerbrown notes:

> When Paragon killed the boss, yeah, we, even though we were shocked or whatever I at least didn't feel like we didn't do our best—meaning that it wasn't skill wise that we failed or anything like that so the only flaw was that we didn't have the alts or the roster big enough to accommodate the tactics. It was pretty much fail preparation and not fail tactics. (Rogerbrown, Method guild, VOIP interview, September 2011)

So for Shakaroz and Rogerbrown the failure on Ragnaros was about external factors that they had not planned for or accommodated, 'fail preparation' and 'Ragnaros being impassable', almost suggesting a lack of control over both the diegetic ('Rag being impassable') and non-diegetic ('fail preparation') nature of gamic action in the fight. They did not blame their failure on the final boss on the failure of skill or ability (gamic and internal competition). If anything, the poignancy of the group's strong negative reaction to the Majordomo failure despite the fact that the failure did not mean they would necessarily lose the overall race against Paragon (or fail in their external competitive drive) points to the significance that these additional levels of competition and performance play for raiding guilds. It's not simply about the overall winning of the race, it's how they win it. For Method, those factors that they knew they had a control over—the accurate execution of a proven game tactic (gamic competition) their own performance and ability levels (internal competition)—had not been successful and that proved to be a significant failure on their part. This illustrates the significance of these types of competitive attitude amongst raiders and indicates that the complexity of competition can and should be considered from different perspectives.

This account of Method's experience during a raiding race is illustrative of not only the ways that the different forms of competition can overlap, but also the complex and messy ways in which other factors such as formation and action impact these experiences. Just as the three forms of competition (the gamic, internal and external) are not necessarily experienced in isolation by raiders, neither are the other components that distinguish how the raiding community chooses the ways that it plays. In this account, gamic action that was both player

shaped (non-diegetic) or player-experienced (diegetic), and even those controllable gamic actions that impact the ability of the group to perform (such as the 'fail preparation' that Rogerbrown attributed to the guild's inability to win the overall race; or those times when Sco asked the group if they even wanted to kill the boss as they were 'playing like shit') and meet their competitive goals. What this suggests is that while the competitive experience is integral to framing the way that a raider wants to play, it is also part of a larger process that is connected to and flows through the gamic action of raiding. Raiders orient themselves toward competitive gameplay as it represents how they like to play.

Conclusion

As I indicated at the outset of this chapter, to date games research has not made a significant study into the relationship between competition and digital game play; this chapter endeavours to remedy this by engaging in the relationship between raiding and competition, an engagement which is expressed not only through the literal gamic action of raiding, but also across a multitude of mediated expressions in the raiding community. In earlier chapters I described group formation as the *organizing principle* of raiding (that which enables the scope of coordinated group play) and action in raiding as its fundamental *form of engagement* in the persistent game environment. I now propose that competition represents raiding's *defining expression of play*. Competition is the way that raiders like to play and this is reinforced by the complex expressions of the layers of competition in raiding.

The multiplayer game environment is a 'quite complicated' (Galloway, 2006: 36) space with many pathways of play built into it and many ways in which players can engage with the game environment. While this is no less true when considering even the differing approaches to play among raiders, there are a number of recurring thematic principles that help frame and distinguish the experience of raiding gameplay. This chapter has explored one of these principles, competition and mapped its expression within raiding gameplay. It has identified a relationship between forms of competition as enacted on the gamewide (gamic), intragroup (external) or intergroup/individual (internal)

levels. These forms and manifestations of competition shape not only the success and drive of raiders but also inform their sense of self and value. For many raiders, competition is integral to raiding and even a motivating factor for why they like to play an MMO. Due to the complex ways that it presents itself in raiding, competition becomes not just about 'winning a race', it is also about how you win it and the acts and forms through which you complete it. As I've also indicated in my earlier exploration of the action of raiding (see Chapter 6) and the formation of raiding groups (see Chapter 5), while the relationship between raiding and competition is ever-present among raiders, there are many ways that competition is enacted. Competition is expressed in separate and overlapping ways through the individual raider or raiding group's race against the game itself, as represented through gamic competition; through contested action between groups in the form of external competition; and, finally, as an internal expression of competition, either by the raider desiring to improve her own performance or by the contestation of skill between members of a group.

Competition is complex not only for how it is enabled through diegetic gamic action or in how raiders express their predilection for it, but also for how it is mediated. This is demonstrated by the dynamic mediated ways that competition is quantified and visualised throughout the persistent game environment. Raiders are tracked, analysed and displayed in multiphrenic forms demonstrating not only the significance of competition and but also reinforcing the complexity of gamic expression and action within the raiding play space. These mediated sites represent both a kind of historical record of the raiding community but also display its predilection for competition in play. These mediated sites also function as sites of redistributed action, sustaining and building the community and allowing competitive raiders to demonstrate their success (competition), attract new raiding members (formation) and perpetuate their practice of play (action). If anything, this form of mediated expression attends to the fact that raiding takes place in a persistent (and perpetual) game environment and as such has found ways to play the game that reflect its desire for longevity.

Also noteworthy about these forms of competition is that they take place in groups—and that group play helps to shape both the nature of competition in the persistent game environment and the ways in which players sustain these expressions of play. By considering the layers of competition that exist in raiding—the gamic, internal and external—one can begin to understand the complex ways in which raiders have engaged with the competitive to help sustain their long term affiliation with the game itself. Competition represents more than a race against teams or just a competition against the game itself; it becomes a fluid, technologically framed and spatially dynamic experience allowing for players to work both in conjunction and independently to express and sustain their engagement with the game. Much as the formation of guilds speak to a kind of localized subculture that allows raiders to sustain their connection to game activity, so does competition sustain their enjoyment of the game. To echo Synti's word from the outset of this chapter: 'we do this mostly for the competition.' It is competition that draws raiders in and the complex ways in which competition is enacted provides a means for raiders to sustain gameplay.

The forms of gamic expression outlined and explored in this chapter resonate with broader notions of sport. If one removes concepts like 'online', 'game' or 'play' from a definition of raiding in a persistent game environment; it might be described as something like a 'skills-based activity where teams perform multiple times in a race to complete specific challenges'. And this description may not necessarily bring an online or virtual activity to mind. In academic work done around sports studies, there is an acknowledged link between play, games and sports but sport has been traditionally framed from the perspective of it being physical in nature (Guttman, 1978). Sports researchers, however, considering the future of sport or its scope have begun to question these notions, particularly when considering if e-sports and its virtuality should be considered part of these broader definitions of sport (Johansson and Thiborg, 2010).

A few games and sports researchers have focused attention on studying e-sports, particularly on professionalised e-sports. Jonasson and Thiborg (2010: 288) have described e-sports as: 'a sport within and through the medium of cyberspace, as

the new upcoming sport and as competitive (professional) video or computer gaming'. They also propose that a future definition of sport might include a reference to virtuality as one component. Digital games attract large playing audiences, including youth, which has been described as challenging the scope of 'modern and hegemonic sport' (Jonasson and Thiborg, 2010: 287), though Crawford's (2005; 2008) work around sport and digital game play suggests that sports, digital games and play are far less distinctive or at odds than might have ordinarily been portrayed in mainstream media, that in fact an affinity exists. There is both the idea that sports fans gravitate toward sports-themed digital games and that the transmedia (Jenkins, 2004) application of these narratives actually reinforces a predilection toward sport (Crawford, 2005; 2008).

While many sports often now have their digital game equivalent[127] (just as board games have their digital equivalent, as I discussed in Chapter 3), many of the most competitive expressions within digital gameplay appears to be emerging from those forms of gameplay that are unique to the medium. An example of individual e-sports would be *StarCraft II,* a real time strategy (RTS) game where gamers are pitted against each other in a race for resource and geographical dominance (last player alive, essentially).

There has been some consideration of this emergence of professionalization in the digital game and, in a related sense, the emergence of e-sports—or the formal (both in professional and amateur capacities) competitive arrangement of gamic action, either between individuals or groups. Competition is the all-encompassing representation of this gamic expression. The contribution that the findings of this chapter make to this fledgling area of e-sport/pro-gaming studies is a consideration of the nuanced and complex ways in which raiders and the large groups to which they belong (in contrast to the smaller groups or individuals that have typically been portrayed and studied in other research into e-sports) engage in competition and, on a related level, sports. It also contributes to literatures

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[127] Excellent examples would be the *Madden* American football game series or the *FIFA* football game series.

around e-sports by providing a study into the ways in which a digital game with a highly organized form of large group play which is primarily amateur in nature is making the transition to professionalized e-sport.

This is reinforced by T.L. Taylor (2012) when she asserts that sport in gaming is worthy of study because it 'leads us to the heart of questions about the nature and status of play in computer games, the possibilities for (and limitations of) new forms of sport in this digital media age, and the challenges faced by gaming subcultures as they (often ambivalently) find themselves sliding into the mainstream' (2). While this is undoubtedly true, I also posit that based on the findings in this and earlier chapters, it is also about going beyond considering e-sports from the professionalised gaming perspective alone to considering the ways in which competitive game play is integral to the digital game as a whole and represented on amateur levels as well. In the case of these competitively minded game raiders, of whom the vast majority *spend* money rather than make it[128], they often use the same terminology as elite or pro-gamers to enunciate their own experiences with the competitive in play. The work of this chapter makes the assertion that while game raiders are not only interested in the competitive expression of gameplay, they are also interested in competition and in novel ways to arrange their competitive orientation. The persistence of a game environment like WoW allows for more complexity in competition as raiders seek multiple ways to sustain their gameplay.

As raiding is a team-based activity, this chapter's findings around team function and behaviour also warrant reflection, particularly when looked at from a sports-

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[128] Whilst the scope of my doctoral research was not focused on studying the nature of financial compensation provided to those top level elite raiders (such as Paragon or Method as highlighted in this and earlier chapters), I did learn that both of these guilds have received some money or gifts in kind from sponsors, such as Razr providing peripheral gaming equipment (headsets or keyboards) in exchange for including their logo on their community Web sites, or generating income through ad revenue from site visitors. While most of these guilds did disclose the exact amount of money received each month, due to the large membership in raiding guilds, the possible income was typically reported as up to 100 euros/month per member.

based, competitive perspective. Gamic competition, and its expectation for groups to repeatedly attempt strategies and skills to kill a raid boss, can be seen from two perspectives: first, as a series of repeated gamic failures that finally end in success; or second, as a complex, ongoing series of gamic practice sessions where the team learns from and improves on its abilities to master the raid challenges. It reinforces the understanding of sports psychologists about the benefits of practice on sports outcomes. (Travassos *et al, 2012*) It also contributes to research into links between cooperation and competition, and the benefits that come from activity that draws on both competition and cooperation (Carron *et al, 2005*). A good example of the nature of team work in raiding and its sportlike nature is my portrayal of the guild Method's competitive experience as they struggled to win the raiding race and then come to terms with coming in second. One might mistake it for any team-based sport where teammates rally each other on to perform well and beat the clock followed by the teamwide despair expressed when failure was met. I am also reminded of the data-driven systems of tracking and reporting, devised by raiders themselves, to display and follow competitive progress, raiding performance and overall rankings—is this not also a familiar notion of team-based and individual sports where rankings and placement become the readiest forms of success and competitive acknowledgement? Studying raiding provides a way to consider sports and competitive play within the online environment and provides a way to consider how e-sports might function in large groups.

Through my work with raiders, I drew out the significance of competition in raiding. For a player like Synti, his engagement with the external aspect of competition and the race between guilds is overt and a single driving factor for why he continues to raid; and then for a player like Rebs, he sees the friendly competition between fellow raiders (the internal competition) as central to the enjoyment of his raiding experience. And in the case of the raiding guild Method, the experience of racing for 'world first' became not only an engagement with team-based competition in its many forms and demonstrated how while the experience of competition is often about winning, what the race is against isn't always straightforward. If anything, these varying ways in which competition is enunciated and enacted points to a raiding community that distinguishes itself, as

was identified in earlier chapters, as a community interested in specifics rather than generalities. Yes, I describe raiders as competitive, but there is variation in how they exhibit competitiveness. It is a combination of factors—from the individual playing choices of the raider, to the culture and dynamic of an individual raiding guild (as considered in Chapter 5 when I looked at raiding guild formation), to the active engagement with the raiding space and gameplay (as explored in Chapter 6, through the idea of action in raiding) that best defines how a raider prioritises her relationship with competition. And the nature of this competitive expression provides new ways to think through how sport and team play can be considered in the persistent game environment and helps contribute toward the developing field of research around the digital game as sport and the gradual professionalization of digital gaming, including raiding in the MMO. Competition becomes the defining expression of play in the landscape of raiding but it does not operate in isolation. These core values of raiding—competition, formation, and action—have an interwoven and symbiotic relationship that function in concert to support gameplay in an environment that is distinctive not only for its forms and expressions of play but also for its persistence.

The Way We Play:
Concluding Thoughts

I began this thesis by tracing my own evolution from a gamer to a raider in WoW. At first I viewed WoW as just another game to be played. I barely anticipated it having much of an impact on me or providing a gamic environment that would keep my interest for over six years. Once I started raiding, however, and became enmeshed in its social relations, active spaces of play, and, competitive orientation, I didn't just want to play the game, I wanted to play it well and with others. It was almost as if the overlapping of these principles of formation, competition, and action deepened and sustained my gamic interests. I argue that it is this specific and complex combination of features that engages raiders and retains their long-term interest. Considering the fact that some raiders have been playing WoW since its launch in late 2004 and are still raiding in 2012, it's hard to see raiding as a gamic activity alone; rather, it is more like a complex arrangement of 'material socio-spatial relations' (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001: 52) aimed at sustaining a relationship with spaces of play.

Throughout the thesis, I drew together the specific principles of play that shape the practice of raiding in the persistent game environment. The first empirical chapter attended to the nature and scope of formation among raiding guilds. Formation represents the organizing principle of raiding. Groups use the principles of formation to arrange their social relations and to coordinate their group play. There are subtle and noticeable variations in the ways in which

groups form, however, allowing groups to organise themselves according to expectations for goals, performance, social atmosphere and resilience.

In the second empirical chapter I built on ideas of formation as raiding's organizational framework to look at the fundamental engagement with raiding itself: its action. I presented the complexity of action in raiding by first considering the ways in which the overlapping spaces of play are pre-shaped and navigated and then drew out the complex moments of gamic action that exist in the raiding play space. Like Galloway (2006), I assert that the game is an action-based medium and as such, action represents the primary function of raiding. But when regarding activity in the persistent game environment, I find that gamic action becomes an expansive concept. It is multifaceted in scope and spatially framed, meaning that action itself does not just incorporate diegetic gameplay alone, but is also rich in nondiegetic actions and spaces that work to perpetuate and support the game environment.

The final empirical chapter considered the predominant expression of play among raiders: competition. It indicated that it is not just about the ways in which raiders configure gamic action and formation that frames the raiding environment, it is also *the way they like to play that defines them*. In the case of raiding, the layers of competition shape not only the success and drive of raiders but also orient their interest in raiding. There is also complexity in how competition is expressed. As was demonstrated in the exploration of group formation and action in raiding, while the relationship between raiding and competition is ever-present among raiders, there is no one single way that it is enacted or expressed. Rather it forms a framework for expression that defines the way that raiders like to play. A series of interacting moments of competitive engagement again indicates that all of these components of raiding (action, formation, and competition) paint a picture of the raiding environment: it is malleable, adaptable, complicated and engaging. Being a raider is not just about playing a game, it is about creating and sustaining favourable conditions for playing that ensure a successful navigation of the complexities in the gamic

environment. It requires sustainable social relations, a creative pre-shaping of gamic action in the play space, and a desire to succeed in the gamic environment.

Toward an understanding about raiding

This thesis has studied the nature and scope of raiding gameplay within the persistent game environment. Furthermore, it sought to discuss what the distinguishing and specific actions of raiding gameplay are by following three recurring themes of enquiry—action, competition and formation. I sought to address specific questions about raiding practice by considering not only its gamic practice and development within the MMO but also the nature of its arrangement in a game environment that is distinguishable by its persistence. I was also interested in a number of specifics around raiding, primarily focused on the following areas of concern: the way in which *formation* occurs in raiding and how it informs localized structures of group play; the ways in which action both impacts raiding gameplay and the layers of space in the persistent game environment; and how competition is structured and manifested in groups and raiding game play. All of these questions were intended to shape and frame the nature of gamic action among raiders. I found a rich and complex community with the formation of its guild as its primary building block for play and an orientation toward manipulating the space of play to facilitate gamic action. This was a community interested in competitive play and focused on finding complex ways to sustain its gameplay. As such, I propose the following argument about the nature of raiding gameplay:

> Competition, action and formation in raiding are interwoven to support and work through each together to facilitate *sustained* gameplay in a persistent game environment. Group formation represents the *organizing principle* of raiding (that which enables the scope of coordinated group play); action in raiding is its fundamental *form of engagement* (the performance of gamic action within the game space)*;* and competition represents raiding's *defining expression of play* (in the ways in which raiders compete against the game, each other, and their own performance goals).

Conclusions drawn from this suggest that the study of game raiding offers an important perspective to understanding the nature of the online persistent game environment; an environment that is at once controlled and malleable,

multisensory and immersive, sustaining and engaging, and complex yet localized, creating many simultaneous moments in gamic action where these representations of spatialized action, formation and competition function not so much to define gameplay but more so to shape and enable its persistence.

Through the work presented in this thesis I propose a framework for understanding the nature of raiding in an MMO. First and foremost, game raiding is framed by its *persistence*. This persistence is sustained through the very specific ways in which raiders engage in formation, action and competition. What I mean by this is that in a game that has no foreseeable 'end' to it—an unwinnable game—the defining aspect of the game becomes not so much about reaching its end or conclusion but more about the way that one continues to exist in the gamic environment. This persistence is maintained through the ways that raiders shape their gameplay. Formation in raiding, for example, exists to sustain gamic relations with other raiders so that they can continue to raid together. The specific ways in which raiding guilds shape (and often reshape) their formation is typically done with the specific aim of persistence in mind as well.

Contributions made

First and foremost, this work represents the first in-depth study into delineating the core principles of raiding in an online game environment. This thesis relied on the voices of the users of this specific game space—the raider and raiding guild—to trace this form of gamic activity and the reason for its perpetuation as a long term engagement by raiders. It has also provided a better sense of the pre-shaping and socio-signification of the gamic space as produced by raiders and the groups to which they belong. This thesis is a contribution to the body of work on the scope and nature of digital life, and the digital game in particular, by considering the experience of gamic activity in raiding from the perspective of group activity and within the confines of the online environment. I would like to highlight the contributions this thesis has made to specific academic fields, including games

studies and geography. My aim here is to draw links between my own work, the pre-existing work being done and the potential for future research.

First, the thesis has developed work on MMOs, showing how gameplay in MMOs differs from other digital games. I have done this by studying the complex scope of raiding and its distinguishing features, including the impacts of its persistence on the specific shaping of gameplay in raiding. While prior research has endeavoured to grapple with persistence by describing its gamic environment using terms like world or community (Kryzwinska and Lockwood, 2006: Bainbridge, 2010), the impact of persistence on MMO gameplay practices is less studied. An online game like an MMO is designed to providing ongoing access and game content to its players, which is why both Bainbridge (2010) and Ducheneaut *et al* (2006) note an MMO's gamic depth (as many games in one). Raiding encapsulates this persistence through its engagement with a complex series of gamic actions, formations and expressions, all shaped to not only support gameplay but adapted to do so in the persistent game environment. Games are often seen as activities that have a beginning, middle and end. How does the nature of a game change when its end becomes 'endless'? How would you play it? What if 'winning the game' was replaced with 'staying ahead' or 'persisting in the game'? How would experiences like winning, performing or playing with others look in a game that never ended? I assert that the work of this thesis contributes an answer to that question by enunciating the complex ways that raiders shape and pre-shape their game play—from its formation to its gamic action and competitive expressions—in a way that sustains rather than simply enabling play.

In addition, this thesis supplements the existing literature on games research by contributing to the theoretical work done on gamic action in the digital game. Woven throughout this thesis was theoretical inspiration drawn from Galloway's moments of gamic action (2006) to flexibly frame my study into raiding practices. From this work, I adapted Galloway's idea of gamic action to explore gamic action as expressions of competition or spatial relations. While Galloway himself does not attend to these aspects of the gamic action in his own work (he would

probably remind me that he viewed his own work on gamic actions as 'provisional' [Galloway: 2006: xi] suggestions), I assert that to consider gamic action in raiding without attending to its relationship to space, groups and competition would limit its scope. This is particularly relevant when considering the 'complicated nature' (Galloway: 2006: 36) of the persistent game environment and the complex and overlapping ways that action is shaped within it. Space becomes an active form of gameplay in raiding, where the player can shape and control it to support gameplay. It is not merely the space within which the raider moves or navigates, but a malleable environment that has a direct relationship to (and impact on) gameplay. My thesis takes the concept of gamic action to beyond merely the 'act of gameplay' to consider those interrelated aspects that are indelibly linked to gamic action in digital game environments such as MMOs.

This thesis also contributes to existing work on subcultures through its study of how groups form and arrange their gamic activity in a persistent game environment. By considering how the guild, as a localized expression of raiding and raiding as a specific community within gaming, there is a way to look at how the nature of groupings can be a framework for exploring the nature of subcultures. In the case of the raiding subculture, its definition and association appears framed more by the arrangement of values and specifics aimed at organizing action in contrast to other defining factors that may create another subculture. In the case of raiding as subculture, there is more of an affinity with subcultures that are oriented toward an action of production as compared to a subculture oriented toward appearance, for example. But above all, the study of raiding informs subculture research as a study of a subculture that emerged from and exists exclusively online, rather than a subculture that may have more conventional roots but utilizes online features to propagate itself.

This work contributes further to questions of sport/e-sport and the digital game by looking at the ways in which competition has been enacted in raiding and how large groups of players engage with complex forms of competition in order to help sustain this form of online gameplay. There is an opportunity for those in games studies and sports research studying the nature and scope of the digital game as sport to look at the work in this thesis as a starting point from which to consider

how competitively oriented large groups may have correlations with what is typically viewed as a sport. In addition, This thesis has provided a means to reflect on the nature of competition and, in a related way, e-sports as they are emerging largely through non-professionalized means. Much of the very limited work done to date has been more interested in studying either the crossover of conventional sports into the digital realm (real-time football being played digitally as *FIFA,* for example) or the emergence of professional electronic sports competitions and teams (in the form of Major League Gaming or *Starcraft II* competitions). What this work does is consider the expression of competition and team-based gameplay from the perspective of a largely amateur base and a primarily player-driven establishment of systems of competitive expression and tracking (such as ranking tables). This could allow for a wider consideration of the nature of the digital game as sport, such as more conventional types of sport are looked at from both their professionalized/elite perspectives and the amateur/casual pursuit.

Through considering space and action through raiding in Chapter 6, this work contributes to studies into new ways that space and action are represented in the persistent game environment, particularly when considering the dynamics between the real and virtual and the material and immaterial. Space functions, this work found, as a kind of malleable entity that is neither dominated by its 'real' components nor its 'virtual' aspects, but instead dependent on the interdependency and commingling of these elements. This also results in an affinity with Haraway's suggestion (1991) of the cyborg. The ways in which these forms of space and action, and the utilization of these two aspects through online gameplay such as raiding, speaks to her suggestion that there is a dualism at play in our navigation of these spaces and that this also contributes to the wider literatures around the virtual and real and the complex ways that these types of spaces continue to act on and are acted upon by users, or in this case, raiders.

Finally, in answering Ash and Gallacher's invitation (2011: 363) for geographers to 'contribute something distinctive to' digital games research, I have advanced work on digital games in geography by attending to the study of group raiding practices

in the persistent game environment, a gamic environment that has been so far understudied among geographers. Through my study into raiding play, I have considered two areas of specific concern to human geography: the MMO's malleable space and the complexity of gamic action that inhabits the persistent game environment. Shaw and Warf (2009), in one of the few geography studies into the MMO, highlight this when they describe digital games as 'virtual spaces of activity' (1332). My study into the ways that raiders shape the spaces of play for play in an MMO contributes ways to think through the complex nature of these online spaces that are both playful and persistent. In addition, geography's interest in the embodied nature of everyday practices will benefit from this work as it contributes to understandings about the ways in which movement and action can exist in multiple ways within the online space of a persistent game. My methodological work in an online game environment also contributes perspectives into qualitative research practices in a multiphrenic online environment.

My work encourages geographers to think differently about play by inviting them to engage further with studying play within a persistent online game environment. As Shaw and Warf note (2009) it is surprising that so little academic work into the digital game has come from human geography, and I would add it is lamentable that even less attention has been given to an online persistent game environment such as WoW. This is a gamic environment where raiders shape the very spaces of play to facilitate their gameplay practices. It is also an environment where group dynamics and movements reign supreme, creating a compelling arena of study into group practices and problem-solving across the complex, persistent spaces that raiding inhabits, that I have shown to be both physical and virtual in nature. By studying the nature of play from within different environments and across different types of digital games, geographers can unearth further understandings about the ways that we want to play (and their related spaces) in a time where digital games are so prevalent across so many platforms and contexts.

Future opportunities

Despite foolishly optimistic estimates early in my research that a thesis would be able to capture everything about raiding in a single work, a work of even this length can't hope to cover every potentiality inherent in such a complex gaming environment, even when considering raiding alone. Rather I position it as a starting point from which to further extend the study of gaming practices within raiding and across other digital games. Within this thesis is outlined the core specificities of raiding, but I would like to propose ways for this work to launch further studies within raiding and the persistent game environment. I outline a few of these opportunities for future research below.

Raiding takes place in an environment that is distinguished in a number of interesting ways. First, it is persistent. As I stated earlier, little work has been done (in the form of longitudinal studies, for example) around the nature and impact of long-term gameplay practices in the persistent game environment suggesting that we know little about the impact that this particular type of game is having on practices of play and games development. Second, the malleability of an MMO such as WoW allows the gamer an unprecedented degree of pre-shaping of its game space and gamic action, which can have a transformative impact on the scope of the gamer–technology relationship. While my study into raiding practices in the MMO reinforced this by demonstrating the extraordinary lengths raiders will go to modify their gamespace and gamic action to improve performance, a question remains as to the engagement in the MMO's malleable space by other gamers who are not primarily interested in raiding gameplay. Further research on the nature of this malleability could capture subtle nuances in signification of gaming practices among players in an MMO based on how they want to play the game and offer an important comparative perspective into existing literatures around player motivations.

Another opportunity for research is that of the emotive (or affective) experience of raiding. Its study could add to the existing work done in geography about affect (Harker, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Shaw and Warf, 2009; Ash, 2010a; Ash and

Gallacher, 2011) and the experiences of group play. The emotive experience is compelling for raiders who often describe their experiences with success and failure from a 'feeling' perspective. Even though this thesis did not have space to fully explore affect in raiding play, the potency of its experience was captured to some degree, particularly when considering the case study about Method in Chapter 7 (pp. 295–308) and the audio recordings of raiding game play (the jubilance of the 'nerdscream' in recording 1-1, and the anguish of failure in recording 5.1). Further studying the affective in gamic action could not only contribute to the body of work in geography around affect, but also allow for a further expansion of Galloway's moments of gamic action (2006).

I also call for more work to be done around the impacts of these gamic environments on the geographies of children and youth. There is a great deal of opportunity to consider the long-term socio-spatial and material engagement of children and youth in these persistent game environments and what types of relations they produce. There are also implications for educational research within the persistent game environment, particularly as it relates to learning from these types of group-oriented game environments to encourage team building, problem solving or group learning.

As in the case of any research conducted in the here and now, things can and do continue progressing even after the books have been closed on a period of study. This seems particularly true when studying a gamic environment that is driven by financial and market agendas—one that has a consumer base that borders on zealous in their desire for newer, better and faster content. So a few notes should be made about what has continued to develop since completing my fieldwork on raiding in WoW. Already (since April 2012) the first guilds have begun to compete against each other for the fastest timed completion of a raiding instance with cash prizes offered to the victors. With more game content due to be released in September 2012 (with the latest expansion called 'Mists of Pandaria' and carrying with it an overtly Asian-inspired theme) and the game's availability continuing to grow in Asian markets, the very scope and nature of the high-level external

competition among raiders is likely to grow and develop with it. These recent developments around competition among raiders reinforce its significance as the primary expression of play among raiders and stress the timeliness of further engagement in the role and function of competition within the digital game as it continues to develop.

Finally, I would like to close this thesis by indulging in a bit of wishful thinking about the broader impacts of this work. My hope is that it sheds a clear and honest light on a community that is not only defined by its fascination with excellence in gameplay but also by its long-term connections with each other across far-flung locations and from different backgrounds. They play for each other and with each other and their desire for excellence in gameplay is driven by the particular gamic goals they share. The media has often portrayed the archetypal gamer as existing in isolation and lacking in engagement with 'real life'. I hope that this work will demonstrate that raiders in the MMO are defined more by their *lack* of isolation and an *engagement* with complex forms of gameplay. There is more to gamers and digital games than what the media alone might portray and there is more for us to learn from these playful environments as they continue to grow in popularity and complexity.

Appendix

The following represents an abridged outline of individual and group participants cited in the thesis, including a basic profile and summary of the form and scope of research contact with these individuals and groups. These are listed by groups (raiding guilds) and individuals (raiders) in alphabetical order, not necessarily in chronological order of research content collected. For the sake of clarity, those individuals and groups that are included in the appendix as research contacts but not directly cited in the thesis have been denoted by their guild name or individual name being underlined.

Raiding guilds (groups)

Ref	Guild name	Description of guild	Research contact
	Adept (later reformed as Suit Up)	*An Oceanic-based, English-speaking 25-man raiding guild, primarily with players from Australia and New Zealand. Adept was ranked 10th globally in the summer of 2010 and the highest ranked Oceanic region guild. Its current[129] ranking is 40th worldwide.*	I first had contact with Adept in July 2010 through an email interview exchange with Westa, the guild leader. I then conducted a group VOIP interview with Adept later in July 2010.

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[129] *Current* here and elsewhere in this appendix applies to the rankings from the most recent raiding tier (tier is used to refer to a new area where groups can raid; in this case, tier 13); the content of tier 13 raiding was first released on November 29, 2011 with the first guild clearing the content on December 20, 2011 (Kin Raiders, a Korean guild). New raiding content is released approximately every six to twelve months. Also, unless otherwise noted, rankings refer to each raiding guild's identified raiding group size; so a 10-man raiding guild's rankings will be listed in relation to other 10-man guilds and 25-man rankings are in relation to 25-man guilds. The only exception to this would be if I designate the rankings as 'overall'.

Ref	Guild name	Description of guild	Research contact
	Angered	*An EU-server based, English language 10-man raiding guild, based on the Zenedar server. Its current rank is 6th worldwide among 10-man raiding guilds.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Blood Legacy	*A US-server based 10-man raiding guild (on the Warsong server) comprised of mainly Brazilian players with raiding conducted in Portuguese. During tier 11 (and when I conducted my interview and informal subsequent discussions), the guild was one of the top ten ranked 10-man raiding guilds. The guild stopped raiding in December 2011.*	One group interview was conducted in both English and Portuguese (with translation help from guild officer Torchia) in April 2011 on VOIP. Additional discussions with Torchia were conducted via Skype in February 2011 in an informal and intermittent manner.
	Blood Legion	*A US-server based raiding guild (on the Illidan server) comprised of mainly American and Canadian raiders. Blood Legion has been consistently ranked in the top five among US server raiding guilds and top 20 globally. Blood Legion has a community Web site and members of the guild were the recent (and primary) participants in a documentary about raiding and, more specifically, the 'race for world first'.*	I conducted an in-depth group interview in December 2010 with twelve members of the guild via VOIP (Mumble). I also conducted a follow-up interview with one raider (Raegx) via email and Skype (when he volunteered) and intermittent discussions via Skype with a few other members.
	Bridgeburners	*An EU-server based (on the Emerald Dream server), English-language raiding guild and the top-ranked 25-man raiding guild on the server. It describes itself as a high-end raiding guild that is interested in progression. It has raided continuously (3-4 nights a week) since January 2007. Currently ranked 340th globally and 1st on its server.*	A questionnaire was posted on the guild's forum and completed by eleven guild members in March 2011. Further individual interviews were conducted with seven guild members (four asked for a VOIP-based interview, three asked for an IRC text-based interview). A detailed, in-depth interview was conducted via IRC with the guild leader, four guild officers and the former (and founding) guild leader. In the case of several questionnaire respondents

Ref	Guild name	Description of guild	Research contact
			(Mezzy, Aryadne, Thifyx and Olog), shorter informal extended discussions took place in an intermittent manner. Video footage was captured by the guild to follow their raiding activity in the Bastion of Twilight in March 2011 and observation activity (by watching livestreaming) was conducted intermittently between May 2011 and January 2012. Screenshots of raiding screen UIs and photographs were submitted by a number of raiders.
	Chi	*An EU-server based (on the Emerald Dream server), English-language raiding guild. Self-described as a casual, yet focused raiding guild. 25-man raiding guild from September 2008 until February 2010; 10-man raiding guild from March 2010 until present. Chi is currently ranked 23rd on its server and 11,205th worldwide. Chi stopped raiding in February 2012 and did not fully clear the tier 13 raiding content.*	Conducted ongoing participant observation between August 2009 and February 2010. The author participated in raiding activity and other community events with the guild. Conducted individual interviews over VOIP with five members during May 2010. Collected forum postings and visual data samples from November 2009 until May 2010.
	Darkstorm	*EU-server, English language 25-man raiding guild on the Zenedar server. Currently ranked 233rd worldwide.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Drow	*US-server, English language raiding guild on the Doomhammer server. Currently ranked 312nd worldwide.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Ensidia	*EU-server based guild which was the merger result of two top ranked guilds from the Vanilla and the Burning Crusade gaming period of WoW, Nihilum and SK Gaming. The guild ceased raiding during tier 13.*	One text interview on Skype conducted with Nessaj in December 2010 about the founding of Ensidia in November 2008; and one interview over VOIP with Ekyu in June 2011.
	Envy	*EU-server, English language 25-man raiding*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional

Ref	Guild name	Description of guild	Research contact
		guild on the Auchindoun server. Currently ranked 10th worldwide.	advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Eternal Reign	*US 25-man raiding guild (on the Lightbringer server). Currently ranked 57th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Gigantor	*Oceanic-based 25-man raiding guild (on the Barthilas server). Currently ranked 171st.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Heresy	*10-man EU-server raiding guild that merged with Bridgeburners in January 2012.*	
	Immersion	*25-man EU-server raiding guild on the Frostmane server. Ranked 29th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Infusion	*25-man EU-server raiding guild on the Frostmane server. Ranked 29th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Imperium	*25-man raiding guild, English using, and based on the EU Nagrand server. Imperium was ranked 194th worldwide during tier 12 raiding rankings and 298th during tier 13.*	Conducted a group interview with Imperium members over VOIP in June 2011 and an additional text Skype discussion with Fentality, guild leader, in October 2011.
	Inner Sanctum	*An EU-based, English language 25-man raiding guild on the Silvermoon server. During the summer of 2011, Inner Sanctum was ranked 6th worldwide; current ranking is 98th.*	Conducted a group interview with the guild in June 2011 and an additional discussion with Daewyn, a raider in the guild. Content was also drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Loot FTW	*An EU-based, English language 25-man raiding guild on the Ravencrest server. Currently ranked 26th worldwide.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Method	*An EU-server based (on the Twisting Nether server [was Xavius previously]), English-language server. Method is an elite raiding guild that has been consistently ranked in the top ten in the 25-man raiding progression race since 2009. Method is*	Two 2-hour group interviews were conducted with Method in May 2011 and September 2011, respectively, involving 12 members in the first interview and eight in the second interview. Additional individual, unstructured interviews were conducted with three members (Xabok,

Ref	Guild name	Description of guild	Research contact
		currently ranked 6th globally.	Valiane, and Padmay) between June and December 2011; and a structured interview was conducted with Shakaroz in October 2011. Additional audio footage was captured by the raiding guild for the author in July 2012.
	Midnight Sanctuary	*US 25-man raiding guild on the Stormrage server. Ranked 201st.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Nihilum	*Nihilum was a highly successful EU-based, English language 25-man raiding guild that was in existence in 2004–2008 and often dominated the raiding rankings during this period.*	Conducted text interview over Skype with Nessaj in December 2010 about the founding and early raiding activities of Nihilum.
	Offpsring	*EU-server 10-man guild on the Trollbane server. Currently ranked 150th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	The Old Guard	*A 10-man US guild based on the Earthen Ring server. Currently ranked 5777th globally.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Paragon	*An EU-server based, Finnish language 25-man raiding guild (on the Lightning Blade server) that had been, until the most recent tier of raiding, the globally top-ranking raiding guild since tier 10 raiding (the previous three raiding tiers) in early 2010. Unlike the previously listed EU server guilds, Paragon is on an English-language server, but it requires that its raiding members be able to communicate in Finnish. It is currently ranked 4th globally.*	Conducted a text IRC group interview with Arx, xenophics and Tuutti in July 2010. Conducted text IRC individual interviews with Synti, Kruf, Manni, Diamondtear, Sejta and Lappe between January and July 2011. Conducted audio interviews (via VOIP) with Devai (June 2011) and Lazeil in September 2011. Conducted two follow-up interviews with Devai and Diamondtear in October 2011. Was invited by Paragon to post a demographic poll on their forums in November 2010 (see below).
	Pendulum	*EU-based 25-man raiding guild on the Kazzak server. Currently ranked 872nd globally.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Play	*US-based 10-man guild on the Hellscream server. Currently ranked 507th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on

Ref	Guild name	Description of guild	Research contact
			wowprogress.com.
	Premonition	*US-based guild (on Senjin server). Was traditionally a high-ranked raiding guild (ranked 9th worldwide in the summer of 2011), though currently ranked as 49th.*	Conducted an interview with Xav, raid leader, through the messaging system on the guild's Web site in April and May 2011.
	Pulse	*EU-based English-language 10-man raiding guild (on the Kilrogg server). Currently ranked 1408th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	ScrubBusters	*EU-based 25-man raiding guild (on the Maelstrom server). Currently ranked 38th.*	Content drawn from the guild's promotional advertisement as posted on wowprogress.com.
	Solidarity	*EU-based English language 25-man raiding guild on the Outland server. Currently ranked 47th.*	Conducted a group VOIP interview with the raiding guild in June 2011.
	Stars	*A Chinese-language 25-man raiding guild on a Taiwan server (Crystalpine Stinger). Stars achieved its highest ever ranking in the most recent progression raiding race and is the highest ranked Chinese raiding guild in the world. Currently ranked 2nd globally.*	The author conducted a structured email interview exchange with Stars in July 2010; it was designed in the form of a questionnaire and sent via member LeonKing. Additional intermittent email contact was conducted with the guild between August 2010 and April 2012 (via LeonKing).
	vodka	*A US-server based 25-man raiding guild, consistently ranked at or near the top of American raiding guilds and in the top worldwide rankings. Currently ranked 9th.*	Conducted a text based, unstructured discussion with Killars in December 2011. Conducted a voice Skype interview with Grafarian in April 2012.

Individual raiders

Raider	Participant description[130]	Research contact
Affinitii	*Raider in Blood Legion. Male, early 20s, resides in the Missouri, USA.*	Participant in audio interview with Blood Legion (for YouTube purposes) in January

[130] These descriptions apply to each raider's playing status at the time that the author was interacting with them for research purposes. Some raiders may have changed their guilds or stopped raiding in the time since. In addition, age, gender, and location information is included in relation to the time that the research contact took place and as provided (voluntarily) by the raiders themselves.

Raider	Participant description[130]	Research contact
		2012. Conducted a series of text-based discussions between January and March 2012. Captured video footage of livestreaming in March 2012.
Arad	*Raider in Exploding Labrats. Male, mid-20s, located in Finland.*	Conducted a text based Skype individual interview in August 2011. Contributed gamespace photograph, August 2011.
Aryadne	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, early-20s, located in the UK.*	Conducted a phone Skype individual interview to complete questionnaire about raiding practices in March 2011 and a series of intermittent follow-up discussions between April 2011 and April 2012. Captured video footage of guild in Bastion of Twilight raid instance in March 2012.
Atheenya	*Raider in Chi. Female, late-20s, located in Portugal.*	Submitted screenshots of playing UI to the author's research forum in November 2009.
Ballorasteel	*Guild leader of Solidarity. Male, early 20s, located in the UK.*	Participant in a group VOIP interview in June 2011.
Bigjeff	*Raider in Phoenix of the Sun. Male, age unknown, located in the UK.*	Contributed communal gamespace photograph, January 2011.
Celeus	*Guild leader and raid leader of Bridgeburners. Male, early 30s, located in the UK.*	Participated in a text IRC group interview with officers and guild leader of Bridgeburners, April 2011.
Cixel	*Raider in Blood Legion. Male, age unknown, located in the US.*	Participant in the Blood Legion VOIP interview in December 2010.
Devai	*Raider in Paragon. Male, late 20s, located in Finland.*	Participated in individual VOIP interview, May 2011. Additional interview, August 2011. Captured livestream video footage, May 2011.
Diamondtear	*Raider in Paragon. Male, mid-20s, located in Finland.*	Participated in an individual text IRC interview, January 2011. Additional text IRC interview conducted April 2011.
Ekyu	*Raider in Ensidia. Male, mid-20s, located in France.*	Participated in an individual VOIP interview June 2011.
Fentality	*Guild leader of Imperium. Male, early-20s, located in the UK.*	Participant in the group VOIP interview, October 2011. Additional unstructured text Skype interview, October 2011.
Fixation	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male,*	Completed questionnaire in

Raider	Participant description[130]	Research contact
	early-20s, located in the UK.	March 2011 about raiding practices posted on the guild's forum.
Gardez	*Raider in Blood Legion. Male, age unknown, located in Denmark.*	Forum posting made on Bridgeburners internal site, January 2012.
Grafarian	*Guild leader of vodka, American raiding guild. Male, mid-20s, located in the US.*	Participated in two multi-guild interviews (with multiple guilds) conducted via VOIP in December 2011 and January 2012; and participant in a text-based informal interview in April 2012.
Hentrenson	*Raider in Inner Sanctum; later raider in Method. Male, early-20s, located in Denmark.*	Participant in group VOIP interview with Inner Sanctum, June 2011. Participant in group VOIP interview with Method, September 2011.
Hermanni	*Raider in Paragon. Male, early-20s, located in Finland.*	Individual IRC text interview February 2011. Guild site forum post in July 2011.
Hinaika	*Raider in Bridgeburners; former raider in Chi. Male, late-20s, located in Denmark.*	Forum posting made on Bridgeburners internal site, January 2012.
Hoc	*Raider in Phoenix of the Sun. Male, age unknown, located in the UK.*	Contributed communal gamespace photograph, January 2011.
Jum	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, age unknown, located in the UK.*	Forum posting made on Bridgeburners internal site, January 2012.
Killars	*Officer and raider in vodka. Male, early-20s, located in the US.*	Information IRC discussion, December 6, 2011. Conducted a short audio-recorded livestream interview in March 2012 with Athene and Killars (see above) where we discussed (with an audience of approximately 1500) their efforts to encourage gamers to help raise money for charity. During the interview, we also discussed the nature and scope of my research.
Kruf	*Raider in Paragon. Male, early-30s, located in Finland.*	Conducted an IRC text interview in January 2011 and intermittent discussions between January 2011 and May 2012. Kruf also participated in an audio recording interview with members of Paragon in February 2012.
Lappe	*Raider in Paragon. Male, early 20s, located in Finland.*	Conducted an IRC text interview in May 2011.

Raider	Participant description[130]	Research contact
Lawliepop	*Officer and raider in Blood Legion. Female, late-20s, located in the US.*	Participant in the Blood Legion VOIP interview in December 2010.
Lazeil	*Officer and raider in Paragon. Male, mid-20s, located in Finland.*	Conducted VOIP interview (over TeamSpeak) in September 2011.
LeonKing	*Raider from the Chinese guild Stars and their English language PR contact. Male, age unknown, resides in China.*	Was main point of contact for Stars and helped complete, answer, and translate all questions via email.
Lerue	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Female, late-20s, located in the UK.*	Completed questionnaire in March 2011 about raiding practices posted on the guild's forum. Forum posting made on Bridgeburners internal site, January 2012.
Mezzy	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, early-20s, located in the Netherlands.*	Interviewed with the questionnaire in March 2011; had an informal discussion about addons in April 2011; and submitted video and photographic content in June 2011.
Naathwen	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Female, age unknown, located in Sweden.*	Forum posting made on Bridgeburners internal site, January 2012.
Nyathiel	*Raider in Chi. Female, early 30s, located in the UK.*	Contributed communal gamespace photograph, January 2011.
Olog	*Officer and raid leader in Bridgeburners. Male, early-30s, located in Finland.*	Participated in a text IRC group interview with officers and guild leader of Bridgeburners, April 2011. Captured video footage of guild in Bastion of Twilight raid instance in March 2012. Forum posting on the guild's internal Web site in February 2012. Additional, intermittent text based Skype discussions
Phailia	*Guild leader of Inner Sanctum. Male, early-20s, located in the UK.*	Participant in group VOIP interview June 2011.
Prue	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, late-20s, located in Denmark.*	Completed questionnaire in March 2011 about raiding practices posted on the guild's forum. Participated in a text IRC group interview with officers and guild leader of Bridgeburners, April 2011.
Raegx	*Raider in Blood Legion. Male, mid-20s, located in the US.*	Conducted a series (several) of email interviews in March 2011.
Rasiel	*Raider in Chi. Male, late-20s, located in Portugal.*	Submitted screenshots of playing UI to the author's

Raider	Participant description[130]	Research contact
		research forum in November 2009.
Rebs	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, early-20s, located in the UK.*	Completed questionnaire in March 2011 about raiding practices posted on the guild's forum.
Rogerbrown	*Raider in Method. Male, early-20s, located in Greece.*	Participated in both group interviews over VOIP with Method (May 2011 and September 2011).
Sco	*Guild leader of Method. Male, early-20s, located in the UK.*	Participated in group interview over VOIP, May 2011.
Sejta	*Guild leader and raid leader of Paragon. Male, mid-20s, located in Finland.*	Participated in an individual text IRC interview in April 2011.
Shakaroz	*Raider in Method. Male, early-20s, located in Denmark.*	Participated in both group interviews over VOIP with Method (May 2011 and September 2011) and an additional one-to-one interview over text on Skype in October 2011.
Simplez	*Raider in Solidarity. Male, age unknown, located in the UK.*	Participant in the group interview over VOIP in June 2011.
Synti	*Raider in Paragon. Male, late-20s, located in Finland.*	Participated in individual IRC text interview, January 2011. Additional intermittent discussions between January and October 2011.
Taldy	*Raider in Imperium. Male, age unknown, located in the UK.*	Participant in the group VOIP interview, October 2011.
Taralish	*Officer and raider in Bridgeburners. Female, early 30s, located in the Netherlands.*	Completed questionnaire in March 2011 about raiding practices posted on the guild's forum. Participated in a text IRC group interview with officers and guild leader of Bridgeburners, April 2011.
Thifyx	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, mid-30s, located in the Netherlands.*	Completed questionnaire in March 2011 about raiding practices posted on the guild's forum.
Tokk	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, mid-20s, located in Denmark.*	Participated in an IRC text interview, March 2011.
Torchia	*Officer and raider in Blood Legacy. Male, early-30s, located in Brazil.*	Spoke with Torchia in February 2011 via text on Skype and as part of the Blood Legacy group interview in April 2011.
Trekkie	*Raider in Method. Male, early-20s, located in Sweden.*	Participated in both group interviews over VOIP with Method (May 2011 and

Raider	Participant description[130]	Research contact
		September 2011).
Ulterion	*Guild leader of Chi. Male, early-30s, located in Norway.*	Submitted screen shots of raiding gameplay, November 2009.
Valiane	*Raider in Method. Male, early-20s, located in Denmark.*	Participated in both group interviews over VOIP with Method (May 2011 and September 2011).
Varil	*Raider in Chi. Male, late-20s, located in the UK.*	Submitted screenshot of playing UI to the author in November 2009.
Werbil	*Raider in Bridgeburners. Male, age unknown, located in the UK.*	Forum posting made on Bridgeburners internal site, January 2012.
Xabok	*Raider in Method. Male, mid-20s, located in Greece.*	Participated in both group interviews over VOIP with Method (May 2011 and September 2011).
Xav	*Officer and raider in Premonition. Male, age unknown, located in the US.*	Conducted individual interview via Premonition site message system, May 2011.
xenophics	*Raider in Paragon. Female, mid-20s, located in Finland.*	Participated in group IRC interview, July 2010. Conducted intermittent and unstructured discussions over IRC text between August 2010 and April 2012.

Additional contributors or participants[131]

Participant	Participant description	Research contact
Athene	*Professional gamer with a significant online presence by virtue of his YouTube channel and livestreaming. Athene is well known within the gaming community for livestreaming his own gaming practices (across many types of computer- and console-based games) and his so-called gaming stunts for live audiences, including being the first WoW player to reach level 70 and the first to reach level 85. Male, age unknown, resides*	Conducted a short audio-recorded livestream interview in March 2012 with Athene and Killars (see above) where we discussed (with an audience of approximately 1500) their efforts to encourage gamers to help raise money for charity. During the interview, we also discussed the nature and scope of my research.

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[131] These were typically participants that are involved in the raiding community to some degree but who may not be actively raiding at the time of their contact with me or had retired from raiding before I spoke with them.

Participant	Participant description	Research contact
	in Belgium.	
Awardruid	*A raiding player identifiable only by the name on the screen shot of his or her game interface. Age, gender, and location unknown.*	The screenshot of Awardruid's user interface was shared with the author in April 2012. Screenshots are widely shared and posted on WoW gamers' sites and I tried to track down the creator of this user interface (see figure 6.7f, page 224) and his name is not on any in-game database, suggesting that the player has deleted this character, renamed it, or may no longer be playing WoW.
Daenon	*Founding guild leader of Bridgeburners; though no longer raiding he is still involved in the guild and often contributes to discussion through the guild's forum. Male, late-20s, located in the Netherlands.*	Participated in an individual text IRC discussion in April 2011. Participated in a text IRC group interview with officers and guild leader of Bridgeburners, April 2011. Additional forum posting, January 2012.
<u>*Eoy*</u>	*Technical staff member of the Manaflask site and former raider in Ensidia and, before then, SK Gaming, raiding guilds of prominence during Vanilla (SK Gaming) and Burning Crusade (Ensidia) period of raiding in WoW. Male, mid-twenties, located in Finland.*	Conducted a text-based interview on Skype in December 2010.
Nessaj	*Former raider and officer with Nihilum and later Ensidia. Stopped raiding in 2008; one of the founders and directors of Manaflask, a raiding-oriented community Web site. Male, late-20s, located in Denmark.*	Interview conducted via text on Skype, December 2010.
Waasa	*The author*	Self-directed exploration of character creation, selection, generation, and early questing of a new character. Took place January 2012.

Additional research content

Source	Description	Research contact
MMO-Champion	*Player contributions to forums in the form of UI screen shots*	UI screen shot examples captured for analysis.
Paragon	*Player contributions to the forum*	Drawn out phrases and descriptors of how raiders

Source	Description	Research contact
community site		identify raiding guilds.
WoW Progress	*Guild advertisements and descriptors from: ScrubBusters, Unholy Trinity, Promethan, Drow, Exordium, Midnight Sanctuary, Bridgeburners, Darkstorm, Reckoning, Immersion, and Infusion.*	Illustrative examples of guild self-descriptors of formation.
WoW Progress	*Hardcore raiding guild (Angered, EU)* *Hardcore progression raiding guild (Fierce, US)* *Hardcore end-game raiding guild (Reckoning, US)* *High-end PvE raiding guild (Apex, EU)* *High-end progression guild (Vigil, US)* *Active high-end raiding guild (SlashCry, EU)* *Semi-hardcore raiding guild (Soapbox, EU)* *Focused raiding guild (Blood Legion, US)* *Family Style raiding (Fuzzy PJs make me tough, US)* *Progression focused raiding guild (Blood Legion, US)* *Social raiding guild (Balance, EU)* *Casual raiding guild (Fuzzy PJs make me tough, US)* *Friendly raiding guild (Ropetown, US)*	Sources of guild self-descriptors (from pp. 160–161).

Additional research content

Source	Description	Research contact
MMO-Champion	*Player contributions to forums in the form of UI screen shots*	UI screen shot examples captured for analysis.
Paragon community site	*Player contributions to the forum*	Drawn out phrases and descriptors of how raiders identify raiding guilds.
WoW Progress	*Guild advertisements and descriptors from: ScrubBusters, Unholy Trinity, Promethan, Drow, Exordium, Midnight Sanctuary, Bridgeburners, Darkstorm, Reckoning, Immersion, and Infusion.*	Illustrative examples of guild self-descriptors of formation.

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