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Abstract: The Reality of Virtual Realities: An in Depth Glimpse at the Interactions That Occur Within the Online Gaming Communities of World of Warcraft and Continuum

By: Patrick Sonstroem

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs or MMOs), now have over 22.5 million active subscriptions, and have become a considerable medium for entertainment and social communities.¹ While a large amount of research has already been done relating to online communities (Turkle 1995; Wilson 2006; Isabella 2007; Meadows 2007; Boellstorff 2008; Williams 2011), this thesis hopes to add new insights into in-game interactions via the use of participant observation through a creative narrative.

This relatively new Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) method has methodological obstacles in ethnography. As the internet changes rapidly, our methods and practices as anthropologists must as well (Hine 2000; Fischer 2008; Faubion 2009). The goal of this research project is to add to the qualitative research on online gaming communities, and to find distinctions between the sub-cultures and behaviours of two distinct games, World of Warcraft and Continuum. Using communication methods used by these groups and real life interaction via CMC, this project identifies important types of social behaviours within the given gaming groups, as well as relating to issues outside of the game. In addition,, the project outlines and updates the methodological processes required to undertake online research in gaming communities, including the use of narrative as a valid research methodology within online communities.

¹ <http://users.telenet.be/mmodata/Charts/TotalSubs.png> last accessed September 29, 2011

The Reality of Virtual Realities

An in Depth Glimpse at the Interactions That Occur
Within the Online Gaming Communities of World of
Warcraft and Continuum

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Masters By Research Thesis in Social Anthropology

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Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs or MMOs), now have over 22.5 million active subscriptions, and have become a considerable medium for entertainment and social communities.² While a large amount of research has already been done relating to online communities (Turkle 1995; Wilson 2006; Isabella 2007; Meadows 2007; Boellstorff 2008; Williams 2011), this thesis hopes to add new insights into in-game interactions via the use of participant observation through a creative narrative.

This relatively new Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) method has methodological obstacles in ethnography. As the internet changes rapidly, our methods and practices as anthropologists must as well (Hine 2000; Fischer 2008; Faubion 2009). The goal of this research project is to add to the qualitative research on online gaming communities, and to find distinctions between the sub-cultures and behaviours of two distinct games, World of Warcraft and Continuum. Using communication methods used by these groups and real life interaction via CMC, this project identifies important types of social behaviours within the given gaming groups, as well as relating to issues outside of the game. In addition to this, the project outlines and updates the methodological processes required to undertake online research in gaming communities, including the use of narrative as a valid research methodology within online communities.

To address these issues, I have created two narratives that represent dialogues that were catalogued during my field research; one narrative representing the game-play and social interactions within the game of World of Warcraft, the other representing Continuum. These two games both provide interesting perspectives on the larger gaming community, with World of Warcraft being one of the largest MMORPGs, and Continuum being one of the oldest. These narratives will give an in depth analysis of the interactions players have within the games, and how these interactions effect perceptions of self, other, and community.

I will begin this thesis with a consideration of the methodologies that I have utilised within my research, as well as an in depth analysis of previous research completed within online communities. I will give special attention to examining research completed on gaming communities and the way that it has influenced my own research. Next I will present the two narratives, beginning with World of Warcraft. Before each narrative there will be a short introduction to give important background information about the game, and following each narrative there will be an analysis section that considers issues specific to each game. Finally, I will conclude with a final

² <http://users.telenet.be/mmodata/Charts/TotalSubs.png> last accessed September 29, 2011

analysis section that considers issues relevant to both games, and that presents possible areas of future research.

Literature Review and Methodology

“The question of what counts as culture in the spaces of virtual worlds has emerged as a compelling topic for research and will likely remain so into the foreseeable future. This is a question not just of theory but also of method. In this formative period for an emerging research community on culture in virtual worlds, it is crucial to foster a wide range of approaches and to challenge forms of methodological partisanship that assert the superiority of any one approach” (Boellstorff 2009, pg. 3).

Despite the long history of research conducted on online communities and virtual worlds, there are still many debates about methodological approaches and a lack of unified definitions for commonly used terminology within the field of study. Due to this breadth of methodology, I will use this section to outline the specific methodologies that I have chosen to use in this research. I will begin with a brief background of ethnography and participant observation as they have been used in research offline throughout history, as the methods and theory in this background provide an important grounding of online research as well. I will also consider the many studies previously conducted within online communities, including works by Turkle, Boellstorff, Rheingold, and Meadows, which comprehensively discuss the methodologies and terminology used within their research. As there is not agreement between these sources, and in order to eliminate any confusion about what specific terms mean with regards to my own research, I have provided the definitions I used throughout my work. Because of the technical nature of the research, these key terms are essential to understanding and providing a clearer picture of the cultural environment within these games. Once the terminology has been considered it will be possible to examine past studies carried out in gaming environments. I will examine the past research completed on World of Warcraft, including works by Nardi and Bainbridge with particular consideration given to the differences between this research and my own. In conjunction with the terminology and previous research, this section contains a background of the various research methodologies used within online communities and virtual worlds, and will provide the reasoning behind the methodologies that I have elected to use within my research. Specifically, I will focus on the use of narrative as a technique in presenting research, considering the challenges, benefits, and its previous use as an anthropological method. Finally, I will briefly consider the ethics of working within an online community, including some of the issues that have been addressed in past research, as well as the ways in which I have ensured ethical research practices within my own research. As the literature and the methodology of my research are so intrinsically linked with each other, I have opted to present the two side by side within this section.

Within my research I used a strong ethnographic approach to provide detailed information

about what these gaming communities are like to the players while they are in the game itself. While this will have many repercussions on other aspects of their life, I decided to view only this portion of their life and how individuals behave in it. As ethnography is many things to many people, it is often difficult to understand what one person means when they say they are using the ethnographic approach (Malinowski 1922; Fetterman 1989; Kutsche 1998; Hine 2000; Faubion 2009; Mayan, 2009). The goal of ethnography is to “grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world” (Malinowski 1922).

Malinowski, along with other functionalists of his time, describes societies and their relationships through organic analogy. Organic metaphors or analogies allow us as readers to “imagine that human societies, like biological organisms, are complexly structured systems composed of innumerable subsystems, each performing one or more vital functions for the system as a living whole” (Rigney 2001, p. 17). In other words, Functionalists use organic metaphors to describe the intricate details of how societies function. In a typical organic model, the system is described as an organism in which cells are structured to build tissues, tissues to create organs, and organs to form an organism as a whole. These are typically described within the human body as our major organs - the liver, heart, lungs, and skin, which are interdependent on one another (Rigney 2001, p. 17). The body does not function without each organ playing its role. This metaphor is then used to help describe how societies function. Similar to a body, societies cannot function without the mutually interdependent parts of the society working together (Rigney 2001, p. 18). Some functionalists, such as Radcliffe-Brown and Durkheim tended towards focusing more on the structures rather than the biological needs and neglected to look at the individual within a society (Goldschmidt 1996, p. 510; Kuper 1977). Within Malinowski's work, he tends to use the metaphor of the body to look at the individual, or the specific organs or cells and how they interact with each other to describe the greater whole. It is this metaphor that can most usefully be extended to apply to gaming communities, which function as individuals in a complex whole. While this is by no means the only metaphor that could be used to describe these relationships, I have found it useful in analyzing interconnections of the individuals that I interacted with in the games.

While functionalist theory plays an important role within my research, it is functionalist methodology that has had the largest impact on my viewpoint. Malinowski was a strong proponent of participant observation, which comprises the main portions of the primary data within my research (Barnard, 2002). Via participant observation, within both the groups of World of Warcraft (WoW) and Continuum, as well as through informal interviews within the two communities, I have looked directly at this larger gaming subculture specifically to try and gain further information to help understand the “native's view point,” and “his relation to life” and how it pertains to “his

world.” (Malinowski 1922) In other words, I am taking a more “Malinowskian” approach, and have started from the individual to gain more understanding of the larger, complex whole. I have built on this individual-based approach in my perspective on participant observation as well, drawing largely on the phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches of Geertz (Geertz 1975; Fetterman 1989; Kutsche 1998; Hine 2000; Gajjala 2007). My research via participant observation is strongly based on “thick description” (Geertz 1975, p. 5). For Geertz, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” (1975, 5) Geertz also occasionally used a text model. Schweizer explains that, “ethnographers have to rely on field notes and transcripts of the stories told by informants to arrive at an ethnographic interpretation of synthesis (as in the Moroccan merchant’s story analyzed in Geertz [1975:7-9].” (1998, 48) This approach is used in a broader sense to collect and gather information to look at, “an ensemble of socially produced and shared meanings.” (Schweizer 1998, p. 48) Schweizer says that this methodology’s task is to not only to understand the meanings behind the written and verbal messages within the field notes and transcripts taken by the anthropologist, but also the larger whole and what the dialogue suggests about that community. (Schweizer 1998, p. 48) My research involved looking directly into the conversations that take place while playing online games, via my field-notes taken through participant observation, to better understand the significance behind both when these interactions take place, and the semantic importance of this dialogue within the larger context of the social community.

Many researchers have asked the question, “What is a Virtual World ? (Bell, 2008; Bainbridge, 2010; Turkle, 1995; Nardi, 2009; Boellstorff, 2008)” While there is debate as to what exactly makes up a Virtual World (or VW), I have chosen a comprehensive definition for the sake of simplifying the terminology used within my research. Mark Bell defines a Virtual World as, “A synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (Bell 2008, pg. 2). In other words, Bell is contending that a VW is a space in which there is a distinct sense of time and space, which continues to exist whether or not the individuals using the space are currently occupying it (Bell 2008).

The discussion of VWs brings us to how people are represented within them. An avatar is how a real life player is represented within a game (Meadows 2007). This avatar could be as simple as a text based name (Turkle 1995). Or it could be something more complex, like the avatars in WoW, fully customisable characters that represent different user attributes within the game itself. In Continuum, the main connection to the player is the name. There are only a set number of ships that are your visual avatar, therefore they are not unique to a single player. For the practical

application within this research, I have chosen to use Meadows' description, that an avatar is a visual interactive representation of the user (2007). The avatar allows players to communicate both with other players and the game itself, as well as to make changes to the environment in which they are in. That being said, an avatar is not the entire representation of self within the communities these groups of gamers play in. Players are not merely represented by this avatar within their online social groups; they have many interactions and discussions outside of the game. These interactions can be controlled through other CMC methods, or can occur in real life. Real names are often exchanged willingly, and in the case of WoW and the RealID system, there is a way to represent self and attach real identity to the avatars and names representing players within the game.

Before entering into a discussion of the methods that I used to analyse this research, I will examine some of the past research completed in World of Warcraft and other online games. As there is no body of research for Continuum, I have looked at research completed on similar gaming communities (Bainbridge, 2010; Boellstorff, 2008; Faubion, 2009; Fischer, 2008; Gajjala, 2007; Hine, 2000; Isabella, 2007; Williams D, 2011; Wilson, 2006; Rheingold, 1994). One of the most important works to consider when examining WoW is Bonnie Nardi's *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (2009), where she examines WoW from all aspects of game play. The aims of Nardi's book are threefold: to "develop an argument about *World of Warcraft* that examines play as active aesthetic experience" (Nardi, 2009, p. 6); to explore the impacts of game design on play and human interactions within the game (Nardi, 2009, p. 7); and "ethnographic reportage—interpreting experiences of playing *World of Warcraft* for those who will never play but wish to understand something of the role of video games in our culture (Nardi, 2009, p. 7). My research largely reflects and expands upon her third aim, ethnographic reportage. The attempt of the narratives is to give a detailed interpretation of gamers' experience, and to allow for better understanding of the role of games in our culture. While both the concepts of human play and game structure play a major role in this, it was not the goal of my research to further explain what many researchers have already done in greater detail.

Another major work is that of William Bainbridge; "*The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World.*" Bainbridge does an amazing job of describing and explaining the major story within the game as well as details about role-playing within the game (Bainbridge, 2010). While his research is extremely valuable for future reference about the history of the game, the social aspects which he researched are not nearly as applicable for my research. As Bainbridge largely focused on role-playing servers, a very small portion of the WoW community, and my main focus was giving a detailed account of the average player's experience, our research did not overlap. That being said, his role-playing accounts utilise a similar approach in writing-

style to the narrative form used to describe the communities in my research. Bainbridge uses large passages of narrative interspersed with sections describing what is happening within these passages. One of Bainbridge's most important contributions is his distinction between a game and a world. Bainbridge contends that, "the greater the nonlinearity, and the greater the choices in general, the more the game becomes a world (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 8)." Bainbridge uses a comparison between the old Nintendo game Mario and WoW to help describe the difference between a game and a world. The Mario series went through a progression from being extremely linear, a player could only move forward or backwards in two dimensions, to later games like Mario Galaxy having a full three dimensional world in which you could do quests in any order with far more flexibility (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 9). WoW on the other hand is populated by millions of people across many servers. Each server is capable of holding around 4000 players (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 9). Bainbridge expands further upon this idea stating that, "World of Warcraft is far more than a game. It contains in excess of five thousand completable quests, each of which might be considered a game, but WoW cannot be completed as a whole" (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 9).

Richard Bartle co-wrote the first Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) in 1978 (Bartle, 2004). In his book, *Designing Virtual Worlds*, Bartle creates a comprehensive blueprint for virtual world design, and explains both why they are built the way they are, and why players are attracted to certain types of design. He does so in a way that is accessible to people who do not understand the complexities of code writing. In addition to this he gives an amazingly detailed account of the history and progression of online gaming, starting from MUDs and going through the development of Everquest, and ending with games around 2003 (Bartle, 2004, pp. 4-31). Bartle, like Bainbridge, contends that these VWs are not just games, but something new (Bartle, 2004, p. xxi). While Bartle discusses in great detail the methods of designing a game and why people stay, my focus was largely on the individual players and creating a description of common events that unfold within these VWs. I will go into further detail about how his theories are applicable to WoW and Continuum in later chapters.

One of the difficulties in describing online games and their communities comes from the complexity of explaining the visual aspect of the game, and the multiple methods of CMC that are occurring simultaneously between members of the community. The technology used both to play the game, and communicate within it is complex and uses terminology that is not necessarily mainstream or easily understood by members outside of the community. Simply put, there are too many things happening at once, and because of this, it is very difficult to select one aspect to describe before the others in order to accurately portray the social event that is happening in real time. This poses a major problem: How can you describe the social event without proper

knowledge of the tools and language that are allowing the event to take place?

In order to simplify the description necessary to achieve understanding of the tools, lingo, and social event simultaneously, I have chosen to use narrative for portions of this study. This form has been used to help convey the ethnographic approach in many research projects, and perhaps most recently and importantly in Tom Boellstorff's *The Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2008). Adopting the style and form Margaret Mead famously used in *The Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead, 1928), Boellstorff describes life in the game of Second Life with amazing accuracy and detail. While Boellstorff looks strictly at life within the virtual culture, I focus on the use of the virtual in these games as a medium for interactions between real individuals. Therefore, rather than comparing the life of individuals within and outside of the game itself, this research focused on how players interact within the game and the other CMC methods used in extension to the game. Additionally, this study examines how players discuss self - that is, who they are outside of the game, with friends they originally met within the game. Using an ethnographic approach via several months of participant observation within WoW guilds and Continuum squads, the next section contains a narrative in which actual events from within the game are paraphrased and combined to give a better understanding of the group as a whole, in addition to the technology used.

This method is a strong application of the previously mentioned "thick description" within ethnography, providing as detailed information as possible in a manner that is more easily understood by the intended audience. Unlike Boellstorff's work, which took a stronger narrative approach in which the view of the anthropologist is emphasised, I have kept many of the complexities of the CMC intact. When a person's point of view is given, it is displayed as it would be in the game, and directly shows the audience to which the player is communicating. I begin each narration with a general explanation of the setting to help give the audience a general idea of how the game works, and the communication involved within it. While I participated in the events within each narrative, for the sake of flow and perspective I did not include myself within the narrative. My role within the narrative is that of the interpreter, providing footnotes on the events that take place within each game. This provides an additional depth of explanation without interrupting the narrative itself. Certain details contained within the narrative will be better explained and expanded upon in the analytical sections following each narration. Specific terminology and language will either be textually described within the narrative, or explained afterwards. A glossary is contained at the end of the document for reference to abbreviations and language used throughout the document.

One of the many things that are apparent in the narratives is that even general

communications between players in a game such as WoW are a huge undertaking by the participants. MMO beginners face a real challenge in keeping track of the social communications while playing. As players develop their knowledge of the game and their characters, social interaction becomes easier. As the nature of games like WoW means that the game is constantly changing and that with every new expansion there are more levels for each individual character to reach, it is difficult within a shorter period of study to actually obtain the levels required to continue participant observation within the raiding groups. Because of this, and due to a lack of time within my own research, the WoW narrative will be discussing an instance within the game that is not of maximum level. I have discussed it as if it is end-game raiding, as it once was, but with the release of the Wrath of the Lich King and Cataclysm expansions, it is no longer of major significance in the game. These interactions still occur within the game, simply the setting has changed. One of the problems with researching online interactions is how quickly the social environment can change. (Fischer 2008, 520) While critics might contend that the method I have used to convey the dialogue observed within the game has “fictionalised” my results, I view it more like Zeitlyn who once said,

“When I write do I construct a fable, an anthropological myth of Mambila as misleading as any fiction? Not so, the jiggers tell me. From Habermas through Thompson I have gained the picture of a conversation between equals in which relations of power, authority and social distance do not obtrude. While no actual conversation may ever be like this its idea serves as a yard stick enabling us to assess actual conversations. I see ethnographies in the same light” (Zeitlyn, 1993).

While no actual conversation was quite like the narrative I have written, it enables us to assess actual conversations that occurred within both games over a longer period of time. Both of these narratives accurately represent the conversations that occur within their given communities during events I both witnessed and participated in. The dialogue within them occurred during the research period of my study, it did not just occur at one single point in time.

Research online allows for the researcher to use many tools that would not ordinarily be available to the anthropologist (Fischer 2008, p. 520). However, I found that many of these tools were more of a hindrance to research than a benefit. For example, originally when I would log into the games, I would immediately create a save file of the game chats so that I could use them for reference later. This ability to log dialogue is something that would often be seen as a blessing. However, when examining the logs themselves, I found that they were so complex and difficult to comprehend that I felt it was somewhat an effort in futility to continue to log game chats as scraping the useful information out of them, and then codifying them, would take longer than the research time allotted. While I still occasionally accessed the original logs created for reference, I did not

transcribe them. Instead, I relied heavily on my own hand-written field notes. The field notes were created by writing down quick notes at the time, and later in the evening going into detail about the events that occurred each day. This was done for both WoW and Continuum.

There are many ethical dilemmas to online research that can be potential problems for online researchers; these can be different from the issues faced by researchers in more traditional settings but must be addressed with the same serious consideration. This research project follows all Association of Social Anthropology (ASA) ethical guidelines, including those recommended by the Association of Internet Researchers ethics committee (Ess & AoIR, 2002), and was conducted with the direct approval of the University of Durham Anthropology Ethics Committee. One of the issues that I contended with during this research was in knowing how to ensure that I was receiving informed consent from research subjects. I ensured that all members of the WoW guilds and Continuum squads that I participated as a member of knew my status as a researcher via posts and discussions within the game, and all gave verbal consent to be included in the research. Additionally, I informed all participants of any risks that they may undertake by accepting to be part of the study. Special detail was given to ensure both name and pseudonyms remained anonymous. As pseudonyms play as important a role as names for identification within the games, they were treated in the same way that names are treated within traditional research. Quotations that could be found by searching online were not used directly, but rather paraphrased to protect the identity of those researched. In addition, many non-obtrusive methods of observation were used within this study. The forums used for both WoW and Trench Wars are publically viewable, and many of my observations were derived from their content. While I ensured that publically viewable posts were made on the forums informing of my status as a researcher within the community, these posts and the people who wrote them were not directly involved or notified of the research conducted, and there was no direct interaction with these individuals. Despite this, I take their protection and anonymity as seriously as any other individual who helped me with my research, and no direct quotations or names were used as it would risk the anonymity of the individual.

World of Warcraft Introduction

World of Warcraft (WoW) was announced by Blizzard[®] Entertainment on September 2nd, 2001 and released on November 23rd, 2004. The game is the fourth instalment of Blizzard's Warcraft series, but is the first Massively Multi-player On-line Role-Playing Game (MMORPG or MMO) released within the series. The original three games of Warcraft are considered Real Time Strategy (RTS) games and while they were well known for their multiplayer content, did not have the same style of game-play that can support a community the size of WoW or other MMORPGs.

Since its release, WoW has been at the forefront of a rising and popular on-line community of MMOs. Despite the lack of actual role-playing going on within the communities, this term is used throughout the genre. With over 11.1 million active subscriptions, it is a major presence in the gaming sub-cultures of North America and Europe.³ Releases and updates in the game are so significant that major news sources, such as the BBC, commonly write articles specifically about the game itself (Ward, 2011; BBC, Staff, 2012, *Blizzard cuts off access to Iranian World of Warcraft*; Cockshut, 2012; BBC, Staff, 2012, *World of Warcraft pandas help boost Activision profits*). The community that plays World of Warcraft is so deeply involved with the game, that they themselves have direct influence over the development of the game. The game allows for player enhanced modification and provides tools to help player developers create add-ons. If the developers make a change too drastic, they may face severe criticism and often have to revert back to prior versions of the game. An ideal example of this was the attempted changes to the RealID, an in-game system to help connect players' in-game identities with popular real name social networks such as Facebook (Blizzard, 2012). The changes, announced on July 6th, 2010, were received with such hostility by the player community that Blizzard decided to never enact the policy at all (Fahey, 2010; Katz, 2010). I will discuss this situation in greater detail within the analysis section following the WoW narrative.

With such a large community playing the game, so much rides on the success of continuous updates and changes to the game to keep members interested. Guilds, the main source of structure for social groups within the game, have a large dependency on the content provided by Blizzard. If a guild runs out of content, the reason for playing the game is diminished, and guilds are organised well enough to move entire games if one is not satisfactory. Blizzard has curtailed this type of mass movement better than nearly any other gaming company, quickly bringing out major updates that

³ <http://users.telenet.be/mmodata/Charts/Subs-1.png> last accessed September 29, 2011

include new content and levels. This provides a difficult dilemma for the researcher. Within *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods* the authors pose the question, “How do we study social and cultural phenomena that may exist for a few years, months, or only weeks?” (Fischer, 2008) This question is certainly an applicable question, both within my research, and to the research of others. In the case of my research, there were several new content patches that significantly changed the game during the period of study. Specifically, the newest expansion of Cataclysm was released soon after the completion of my research. While the content was not available during the time of research, it did create a significant shift in what players were preparing for and aiming to do. Rather than focusing on end game raiding gear and mastering content, the guild within the study was more focused on preparing the guild to quickly level and gear up to face the newer content that was soon to be released with the new expansion. As I was already well behind the required level for the current expansion, I opted to use an older instance that was used for the same purpose as newer ones as the setting for the narrative. While the setting has changed, the dialogue between players was taken from other moments in which I had opportunities to observe players discussions while in their normal environment.

World of Warcraft Narrative

The setting for this particular narrative is an instance; this one in particular is called Coilfang Reservoir. I have chosen this particular instance because it is a 5-man group instance (the most common size for an instance) and one that is at a lower level than that of the newest expansions. The reasoning behind this is because it is actually quite a task to level all the way to 85 in the game now (originally the highest level was 60). This instance is one of the first high level instances in the first expansion of the game. It is contained in a very interesting section of the game which allows a lot of detail to be given, and additionally is easy for other researchers to level up to in order to experience a similar instance first hand.

Instances in World of Warcraft are particular dungeons groups can go into to fight more difficult bosses that will reward them with better items and gear. While you can join groups of random people to do many of the instances, it is quite common for Guilds to schedule times to run them, or just do them at any given time with other guild members currently logged on. These instances generally pose the main game element for players who have already obtained the highest level possible within the current game schematic, and where much of the bonding between players take place within guilds. While most of the dialogue in the game is riddled with typos and grammatical errors, I have chosen to remove that portion of the dialect for ease of reading the narrative, but will give some examples later in the text.

Character names are given before each comment, much the same way as they are represented in the chat within the game while playing. While it may look confusing, this is actually a more simplified version of the actual chat box used within the game. The game uses several advanced text features to help aid players reading so many different chat lines. The standard chat box contains all written text from the game by players. It differentiates between chats by putting numbers in front of the names, colour, and symbols. That being said, at any time you can easily have six or more completely different conversations going on, usually involving some sort of guild chat, public chat, and private chat. Guilds often extend their chats further, and differentiate new chats for raids via class or role within the raid. Fortunately, the game also allows for customizable chat windows. You can create tabs that only contain certain textual information on them, making it easier for some people to keep track of all the text within the game. The chat methods and more details about the CMCs within the game will be explained in greater detail within the analysis section.

An instance in time: communication during an expedition into the Underbog

James, known as Rherit in the game, gets home from his studies at university. He is in his third year studying Economics at a respectable school. While he has plenty of friends to hang out with, and enjoys drinking on the weekends, his weeknights are devoted to a game: World of Warcraft. After dropping off his pack and giving a polite greeting to his flat-mates, he goes straight for his computer and turns it on. He got a few of his flat-mates to try the game, but they weren't as interested as he is, probably because he couldn't get such low level newbs into his guild.⁴

James checks his Guild forums and the WoW webpage and finds nothing of note since the last time he checked he logs on. He clicks the World of Warcraft icon on his desktop and the loading screen pops up. He waits. It's a Tuesday and there is a patch to download before he can play. Frustrated, he reads the patch notes. Seeing that there have been no major modifications to his class, he is relieved. There have been rumours on the forums lately that there might be a nerf coming to Warlocks. Fortunately, the patch isn't a big one and it downloads and installs without a hitch, and the server seems stable enough to play.⁵

Tuesdays are not a major raiding night for James' guild, The Knights of Valor. Being relatively new to MMORPGs, Rherit chose a non-role-playing PVE server to play on.⁶

Many guilds don't raid on Tuesdays because post patch servers are often unstable and likely to crash, either because too many people are logging on at one time, or because the patch itself causes instability in the game client. Because of this, Tuesdays are usually open for Rherit to catch up on some 5-man instances he missed during the process. While the loot itself isn't as good in these, Rherit has not had much luck winning rolls for loot in the big guild raids, and he doesn't have a lot of DKP to be competitive on the big items for his class.⁷

There are a lot of 5-mans that Rherit can help gear up his Warlock, but a new friend in the guild mentioned doing Coilfang Reservoir, one he has never done before. Even though Coilfang Reservoir has some lower level instances, a lot of the gear from there is used for starting raiding

⁴ Newb (or Noob) is a common term used to refer to new players of the game, or players who play the game poorly, depending on the context.

⁵ Nerf is a term used to describe your class becoming weaker, usually because there is already a perception that the class is Over Powered (OP)

⁶ Player versus everyone. Generally means that the server does not have open combat between players in the world unless you personally activate your character to be willing to fight. Player versus Player (PVP) servers have this activated at all times, which means any player from the opposing faction can kill you at any point during the game.

⁷ Dragon Kill Points, better known as DKP, are points awarded by many guilds for attendance and quality of play. They are generally seen as being more fair to guild members than a completely random roll for loot because guilds have to run instances hundreds of times before everyone gets the gear they want, so members who attend the most runs get the highest chance of winning the loot until they spend their points.

sets in the Burning Crusade. Rherit, like many players, ‘power-levelled’ to the highest level so he could play end-game content with a few friends; because of this, he missed most of the instances that often played during the levelling process, as they are not the fastest possible way to level.

Gearing up is significant; right now Rherit is bottom on the Warlock DPS charts.⁸ That's to be expected for now as he's the newest to the raid and hasn't had the opportunity to gear up, but the expectation is that he's skilled, and should soon be pulling his weight along with the other two warlocks in the group.

After saying hello to the guild, Rherit alt-tabs.⁹ He needs to look up the instance on wowhead and wowwiki and sees that there are actually a few nice upgrades in the instance for him that would really help his DPS in raids.¹⁰

Joriy is currently Rherit's best-friend in the guild. Having only joined the guild three months ago, Rherit is in a position where he is starting to get his bearings, but does not know exactly where he stands with each member. However, Rherit knows where he stands with Joriy, who was his in-game friend that recommended his application to the guild. Joriy, whose real name is Ryan is the best Mage in the guild. He has been with the guild since day one and is the ranged caster officer in the guild.¹¹ Although not required, he has been a great help to Rherit in getting him geared up for raids. Most nights they get at least one instance in, but on non-raiding nights they usually take the time to do as many as possible. Even though they only know each-other in game, they live similar lives and are both currently studying at Universities. They often chat to each-other about coursework, and Joriy has even offered to help edit a paper Rherit has been working on.

Rherit> (whispers to Joriy) “So, we're going to do Coilfang Reservoir tonight?”

Joriy> (whispers to Rherit) “Yeah, you should get on teamspeak ASAP so we can chat through it. Have you ever gone in before? It's a little tricky to if you don't know how. Oh, and to be clear, the instance we are doing is in Coilfang Reservoir, but there are actually three of them. We'll be starting at least with The Underbog. It has way better loot for us than The Slave Pens.”

Rherit> (whispers to Joriy) “Never, I'm really looking forward to taking down some new bosses

⁸ Damage per second, better known as DPS is a gauge to how well damage dealers are doing in a raid. Do too little DPS and a guild might kick you out because you are not pulling your weight in big fights.

⁹ Alt-tabbing is a method to minimize the game window and go back to your original operating system's user interface to use other tasks or executables like a web-browser.

¹⁰ These are two popular webpages to look up further information about game mechanics, bosses and the items the drop, and general strategies for battles.

¹¹ Officers are essentially Guild staff positions. While there different ways to make the guild hierarchy, one of the most popular ways is to differentiate leaders via class role. The ranged caster officer, for example, would preside over all other class officers that are in charge of ranged spell casters such as Warlocks, Mages, Priests, and Druids (depending on specializations within the class).

tonight.”¹²

Joriy> (whispers to Rherit) “Good, and don't worry about it, Coilfang is a total zerg rush. It'll be a breeze.”¹³

Rherit> (whispers to Joriy) “Do we have anyone else from the guild coming, or are we going to have to PUG the rest of the group?”¹⁴

Joriy> (whispers to Rherit) “I know Ayrav was interested in going and said he'd be on, but let me ask in guild chat real quick to see if we can get some healing. I hate PUGs.”

Joriy> (guildchat) “Hey guys, who's up for some Underbog tonight? We've got the DPS, all we need now is a tank and a healer and we're set for a few runs!”¹⁵

Ayrav> (guildchat) “Hey, I'm included in that DPS right? I'm stoked to go on that run, I really need the Rogue gear from there!”

Tyrion> (guildchat) “I think I can go on at least a few runs, I have to pick up my kid from piano lessons later, but I have time to tank a few in the mean time.”

Joriy> (guildchat) “Ayrav: Of course you are included! Tyrion: Awesome, just make sure you have at least two hours, if we wipe it's going to take that long, and I'd rather not have to go looking for a replacement tank halfway through.”

Tyrion> (guildchat) “No problem, I've tanked it many times, so long as we have a good healer it'll be as easy as cake for me.”

Urenial> (guildchat) “THE CAKE IS A LIE!”¹⁶

Tyrion> (guildchat) “Har har. Very funny. I don't see any healers on-line in the guild, should we

¹² Whispering is a term used in the game to signify that a message is private. To send a message private you would type “/w” and then the character name. Players can respond quickly to the last message sent by simply typing “/r.” This will automatically respond to the last person who privately messaged you.

¹³ Zerg rush is a common phrase used in on-line games (particularly Blizzard games), generally meaning that you can go through something very quickly and easily with large numbers, or that there is little strategy involved in the process. The term originates from their Starcraft series of games in which there is a race called Zergs.

¹⁴ PUG is an abbreviation of public group, meaning finding people outside of one's guild or friends list.

¹⁵ DPS can also stand for all classes that do damage, tanks and healers are generally harder to come by. Tanks are classes that are designed to absorb incoming damage, and healers are designed to heal that damage for all members of the team.

¹⁶ The term 'meme' might take further explanation. A meme is considered a cultural symbol or phrase that is transmitted and spread between people of a culture or sub-culture. While genes transmit biological information, memes transfer social information. Internet memes are very popular with gamers, and are often interjected into conversations at random. This one is rather popular, and stems from a single-player game called Portal. I've included it simply as a demonstration of how random and unguided chat can be within the game, and that conversations often lead to strange topics. An interjection like this would often create more chat between the other guild members on-line.

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=the+cake+is+a+lie> last viewed 29 September 2011.

wait a bit or should we PUG it?”

Joriy> (guildchat) “Well, if you have a timeframe tonight, I do not think we can risk waiting to see if someone logs on, I’ll send out the invites to everyone and ask in the Looking For Group (LFG) channel if some healer wants to join us.”

Joriy creates group.

Tyrion joins group.

Ayrav joins group.

Rherit joins group.¹⁷

Tyrion, a Dwarven warrior, is the guild’s second tank in raids. Although he’s well geared and does not need any loot from a place like the Underbog (unless it is on heroic mode), he’s always willing to help out. Rherit knows that Tyrion’s real name is Peter, and that he works at some sort of computer programming company. Despite being the second tank, Tyrion is both the Warrior officer and the Tank officer for the guild. Tyrion was one of the original members of the guild and has been an officer since its creation. Tyrion’s wife is also in the guild, and is one of the better healers in the guild.

The guild was created when the previous guild the officers were in started to become less organised. The group was annoyed at the low maturity level of their old guild and wanted to make a fresh start. The Knights of Valor split their goals into two things: entertainment and raid progression. There are a lot of guilds that focus only on raid progression, but because so many of the founders of the Knights of Valor had friends and family playing who were not interested in raiding alone, the guild focuses on creating an environment in which both the casual and hardcore players can have fun at the same time.

One of the Knights of Valor’s biggest selling points to its members and prospective members is that they have a strict 18 and older policy. This is both to keep the guild chat less annoying, and because there are many mature conversations within the guild chat that some might not consider suitable for non-adults. Even though the age requirement is set at 18, most of the guild is in their 20s or 30s. Raid nights often coincide with a bit of drinking, and by the end of the night, teamspeak is filled with random discussions, either about the game or current events outside the

¹⁷ The chat box will often show little snippets of information like this to players. The messages themselves come from the server, and simply represent a confirmation that your command to create a group and invite players has been recognized and received on the other player’s side.

game.¹⁸

Joriy> (2: LFG>) LF1 Healer, Underbog PST!¹⁹

Wheatley> (whispers Joriy) lvl 70 priest, is there any competition on healer gear? I'm only looking for one piece in there and would rather not have to roll against some Paladin who wants to wear cloth.

Joriy> (group) wow that was fast, I think we've got a healer already, should be able to get at least two runs in then before our tank leaves.

Joriy> (whispers to Wheatley) you'll be the only healer in there, all the healing loot will be yours to grab!

Wheatley> (whispers to Joriy) Awesome! Send the invite then on my way to coilfang as we speak.

Wheatley joins group.

Wheatley> (group) hey guys, what's up?

Tyrior> (group) not much, you're lucky it's all guild except for you, this should be a breeze so long as a few of us have done it already.

Ayrav> (group) which reminds me... how exactly do I get to coilfang? All I see on the map is this giant lake and no real entrance!

Rherit> (group) Ha-ha man, it is UNDER the water, you're going to have to swim there mate. Oh and don't try swimming there without me, it's apparently too deep without underwater breathing on or an underwater breathing pot.

Ayrav> (group) Woah, I thought you hadn't been there yet, how'd you know?

Rherit> (group) wowhead and youtube man, look it up newb!

Rherit> (group) Anyway, need a few of you down there with me, then we can summon the rest to save some time.

Rherit meets Ayrav in the center of the Zangamarsh region of the game. The region is

¹⁸ This type of guild structure is not uncommon in the game. While there are many raiding or pvp guilds that are exclusive to players that are serious about playing and want to do the most difficult instances, there are many guilds that still allow friends and family to join once the individual has gained a certain status.

¹⁹ This actually says "Looking for one player to complete the group. We are running the Underbog. Please send a private message if you want to join us!" but in games speed and abbreviation are key. Sentences similar to this are common in the game, and the general player base can easily understand what they mean.

vibrant with colour and what first appears to be a forest of trees is actually a forest of giant mushrooms looming above the players. The main city is actually up above on one of the mushroom caps, to get there without a flying mount you must take an elevator, but that is not where they are headed.

In the centre of Zangamarsh is a giant lake, which lore tells us is actually the Naga-made coilfang reservoir. The Nagas in WoW are a mermaid like peoples with upper bodies similar to that of a human (with the exception being that they often have four hands), but lower bodies of a snake. Their heads are often adorned with large fin-like crescents that look similar to that of a fan or crown atop of their head.

In the centre of the lake is a very large structure made largely of what appears to be tubes. This structure is actually a pumping station for the Coilfang Reservoir and is the entrance to the instances below. It protrudes out of the water at several locations and each tube angles inward to become closer at the top appearing to greatly affect the atmosphere around it as there is a large spiral of air twirling above it as if it were a whirlpool.

Once you dive in, the tunnel is direct and easy to navigate; despite being deep underwater it is easy to see, glowing brightly in every direction until you reach the inside of the cave that is no longer submersed. There are four instances within the reservoir, and three discernible paths. The one to the left leads to the Slave Pens, where the Naga keep their slaves and put them to work. Somewhat centrally, the next path leads to the Steamvaults, which is the most difficult 5-man instance within the reservoir. Last, to the right is the Underbog, where Rherit's five-man group is heading tonight. In the centre of the cave structure is a large waterfall; this is actually an entrance to yet another instance, the Serpentshrine Layer. This is a 25-man raid and is only accessible to those who have unlocked it.

Rherit, along with Ayrav and Tyrion summon the final two members of their group right outside of the Underbog instance. Warlocks have the ability to summon members of their groups to them, which is often a big time saver when getting groups together for particular tasks. In order to do this, warlocks have items which are called 'soulshards'. These shards are taken from enemies upon their death and allow Warlocks to both summon other players and powerful demons to aid them in battle.²⁰

²⁰ As the game has ongoing patches and expansions, abilities and items change. While I was conducting research soulshards were still a major component to Warlocks. The playing community had hated soulshards since the original game was released, and in the newest expansion, Cataclysm, the players' voice was finally heard. Rather than having to collect souls and use them as items, the expansion made them a resource, and abilities that required them were changed accordingly. However, since my research time did not overlap with the release of the expansion, I have kept the game

James (Rherit) looks at his clock, he realises that this whole process of getting the group formed and to the instance has already chewed up forty-five minutes of his play-time tonight. While James doesn't really set a limit to how much he should play any given night, he does have to consider the work and reading that must be done for class. Usually what ends up being sacrificed is his sleep, which occasionally he only gets three hours of in a night.

Tonight however, James doesn't anticipate that a few runs of this instance will really take that much time, he should have enough time to get work done and have a good night's sleep. With the whole group right outside the instance, they finally begin.

Joriy> (group) "Alright, let's just chain pull these first few mobs to get it done and over with quickly.²¹ Sporebats go down easy! Tyrion let's get it started."

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "Alright, pulling. Hey, can we get that healer on teamspeak please? I don't feel like typing all night to him."

Joriy> (teamspeak) (Joriy sighs) "Yeah, no problem, let me get him the info."

Joriy> (whispers to Wheatley) "Oh right, jump on our teamspeak server, it's 109.149.93.32 and the PW is Valor."

Wheatley> (whispers to Joriy) "Cool. Thanks, I'll get right on."

Wheatley gets on teamspeak. While there is no visual interface for it in the game, everyone in the group knows he has because of the audio queue built into teamspeak when someone joins the channel.

The group pulls its way through the first section of the Underbog. Killing various beasts such as: Spore bats, these strange flying creatures that have poisonous attacks, Spore walkers, creatures that stand on three legs and tower over any normal race, looking vaguely similar to the tripods in War of the Worlds, Nether Rays, which look very similar to that of a sting ray, only they fly rather than swim, and Fungal Giants, massive lumbering behemoths with fungus growing on their bodies and large tentacle like hands. Rherit has seen most of these creatures up above in the Zangamarsh, but the ones within the Underbog are larger, deadlier creatures that if not treated with the proper respect, will wipe your group quickly. While there are a few general paths you can take through the instance, it is mostly linear, and the group avoids mobs that are not necessary to kill to save time. If they were not all max level, they would probably kill everything in the instance for

details similar to those of the research period.

²¹ Chain pulling is a method of pulling multiple enemies at the same time. While riskier for the team, it can result in clearing enemies significantly faster than otherwise.

experience (XP) but that is not the case. The group clears through these beasts with relative ease and efficiency leading them to the first actual challenge within the Underbog.

Rherit> (guildchat) “Wow, the Underbog is pretty cool, can’t believe I didn’t come in here while levelling, would have been a nice change of pace.”

Urenial> (guildchat) “Yeah man, you were pretty crazy levelling up that quickly, you should have taken some more time to have some fun in the instances.”

Tyrior> (teamspeak) “Alright, let’s get these last two Fungal Giants down and then we’ll eat and drink up for Hungarfen. Ayrav, sap the giant on the left and I’ll tank the right. All heals on me, these last two hit hard!”

Ayrav> (teamspeak) “Got it. Sapping now.”

Rherit> (guildchat) “Yeah, I know. Just about to do a boss fight, one sec. Anyway, how are you doing? Finish that report you were working on for work?”

Rherit> (teamspeak) “DoTing the right mob, it’s been pretty easy staying under the threat meter with you tanking, haven’t pulled a mob off you yet!”²²²³

Tyrior> (teamspeak) “Luls. Just wait for the boss fights though, my gear isn’t the greatest for tanking, be careful not to pull aggro off me because he’ll one shot you easy.”²⁴

Rherit> (teamspeak) “No worries. I’ll keep an eye on it during the fight. Anything I should know about this boss battle?”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Yeah, I’ll cover the boss details in just a second, I have a pizza waiting for me at the door though. Give me a sec while I go pay for it.”

Urenial> (guildchat) “I’m doing alright. Work has been a pain lately. My boss found me using IRC to chat with the guild during work and was furious with me.”²⁵ Needless to say, I won’t be on

²² Damage over Time (DoT) is a term used to describe spells that after being cast remain on the enemy and continue to hurt them over time, rather than instantly.

²³ There are several ‘threat meter’ add-ons that are very popular for WoW. Originally, add-ons allowed you to view you and your groups total ‘threat’ on a target. Due to popularity of these add-ons Blizzard added a threat meter to their UI in release v3.0. Threat is what keeps the enemy attacking an individual unit. Tanks are the people who you want to be getting hit, as the damage dealing classes in WoW can easily be killed by most mobs in instances within a few hits. In game most people refer to this as ‘aggro’ a slang term for aggression. <http://www.wowwiki.com/Threat> last viewed 29 September 2011

²⁴ Amazingly, abbreviations that were initially used for text-only communications have become part of the common lingo in spoken language as well within these communities. Laughing out Loud (LOL) when typing has been converted to ‘Lul’ in spoken word. Due to the way it is pronounced aloud, it has become common a common slang to spell it as ‘Lul’ instead of ‘LoL,’ the traditional spelling.

²⁵ IRC – Internet Relay Chat is a common protocol for making independent chat-rooms for guild members.

there again anytime soon. I finished the report though, and they were pleased with that at least.”

Ayrav> (guildchat) “Oof, that’s rough. I haven’t been caught yet, but I doubt my company would mind, I’m just doing front desk work and there is a lot of free time during parts of the day. They said I could read or browse the web if the calls are low so I’m probably in the clear.”

Rherit> (guildchat) “Lucky, most of my professors won’t allow laptops out in the classroom anymore because of people not paying attention to the lectures.”

Ayrav> (guildchat) “Please, you’re still in school, there’s nothing more lucky than that! You get to play this game all the time while we’re still sitting at work.”

Joriy> (guildchat) “Pfft. It’s not all a life of luxury. At least you get paid for your work! We’re just poor University students barely scrapping by.”

Joriy> (group) “Back.”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Alright, I’m back, thumbs-up, let’s do this, Leeroy Jenkins’ style!”²⁶

Wheatley> (group) “Awesome, oh and sorry I’m not very chatty on teamspeak. My microphone is on the fritz and I’d rather not torture you guys with the screeching sound it makes every time I turn it on.”

Tyrion> (group) “No prob, we’ve all been there. So long as you are on listening we don’t care.”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Alright guys, this boss is pretty easy. Hungarfen really only has two things we need to worry about. Once initiated he spawns mushrooms all about in random areas. After a few seconds these mushrooms explode and make these clouds. DO NOT stay in one of these clouds, it will kill you quickly so keep moving! Secondly, when he gets low on health, about 20% or so, melee attacks start to heal him, so Ayrav, you’re going to have to pull out to a safe distance and stop doing damage entirely. Tyrion once Hungarfen roots himself you move out as well because he does a massive Area of Effect (AoE) spell that will kill you, Rherit and myself will finish him off from a distance. At around 10% health, the roots will expire. Wheatley, the healing job is pretty easy; just don’t get hit by any mushroom clouds. Everyone got it?”²⁷

Wheatley> (group) “Got it.”

²⁶ Leeroy Jenkins is a popular meme from the original release of the game. A video on youtube depicts the player ‘Leeroy Jenkins’ making a spectacularly hilarious mistake in a raid killing his whole group. It has become part of the common lingo of the players of the game. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkCNJRfSZBU> last viewed 29 September 2011

²⁷ AoE spells are abilities that do damage over a large spatial area within the game. These spells often do damage over time as well.

Rherit> (group) “Yep!”

Ayrav> (group) “Oof this fight is going to bring down my DPS for the instance... ready when you are.”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Ready. Alright I’m pulling him!”

Tyrion attacks Hungarfen and the battle begins. Things start normally. The battle is taking place on a large bridge like structure. The centre, where you fight Hungarfen is attached to the narrower parts of the bridge, but expands into its own plateau-like ledge allowing more space for the battle to move around in. The mushrooms appear as expected and Rherit, not knowing the timing of when they explode gets hit by an early one. When they explode a bright neon-green gas emerges and spreads into the general vicinity, making it a deadly place to stand for twenty seconds. Wheatley was able to heal him enough for the fight to continue.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “It’s okay Rherit, just don’t let it happen again, this boss hits hard, and all heals need to be going towards Tyrion.”

Calli> (guildchat) “Sorry, was eating dinner. Back now though!”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Rherit, your DoTs are pushing you high up on the threat meter. Back off a little I’m worried about losing aggro!”

Rherit> (teamspeak) “Alright, no problem, I’ll wait for my threat to drop a little before re-applying the DoTs.”

Calli> (guildchat) “Yeah, right, you University students have it rough. Poor are you? You’re playing this, so you have to have enough money for the monthly payments. More likely living off your parents dime than poor!”

The battle takes much longer than normal mob encounters. A minute in and Hungarfen is down to 80% health. As the tank gets higher threat the team starts dishing out more damage. Hungarfen goes down to 60% and then 40% health without a hitch.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Awesome guys, keep it up. Ayrav, keep an eye on your aggro we don’t want you to have to back out before 20% health!”

Urenial> (guildchat) “LOL. Yeah you’re absolutely right about that. They’re in an instance, you might not get much of a rise out of them now. How are you?”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Ayrav, watch your threat! You’re going to pull him off of me!”

Hungarfen changes targets and attacks Ayrav. Tyrion only loses aggro for two hits; unfortunately, those two hits were enough to kill Ayrav.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Damn-it, Ayrav’s down, we’re going to have to finish him off one down. Don’t worry Wheatley; it wasn’t your fault you can’t heal through that type of damage.”

Calli> (guildchat) “Aw, but what’s the point of being so cruel if they aren’t going to fight back? I’m doing alright I just made a fantastic dinner for myself and a friend, I’ll probably end up in a food-coma in just a little bit.”

Ayrav> (teamspeak) “So sorry! My vanish had 1 second left on cooldown. I thought I could get it off to reduce my threat before I pulled. My mistake.”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “It’s okay, he’s down to 28% health, we were going to have to do the rest of the fight without you anyway.”

The remainder of the group gets Hungarfen down to 20% health. Tyrion pulls back immediately after Hungarfen roots himself and managed to avoid the AoE damage that is so deadly. The next 10% of the battle goes very slowly, with only three people in the group doing anything of significance. Joriy and Rherit are doing as much damage as possible while avoiding the continuously spawning mushrooms, and Wheatley is busy healing everyone that gets hit by the gas. Eventually Joriy and Rherit get Hungarfen down to 10% and Tyrion has to go back in to tank.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Tyrion, we’re about to drop him, get in there and get your threat back up!”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “I’ve got him, hold back a little guys I need to build up my threat or you’ll pull him again!”

Urenial> (guildchat) “Awesome, what’d you cook, and was this guest someone of interest, a man perhaps?”

Ayrav> (teamspeak) “So close guys, you can bring him down! Making it look easy while being one short!”

With Tyrion tanking again, they finish the battle without any additional incidents. With Hungarfen dead, the mushrooms in the vicinity stop growing, and the space calms down and even feels tranquil compared to how hectic it felt earlier. Wheatley brings Ayrav back to life so he doesn’t have to run back to the instance, and the team rests up eating and drinking to regain their health and mana.

Calli> (guildchat) “Yeah right, no it was just a friend from when I was at University. We live close

to each other so we often have dinner together.”

Rherit looks at the corpse, and a few items appear on everyone’s screen. This is their reward for killing the boss. Only one item drops, [Starlight Gauntlets] a pair of leather gloves.²⁸ The team decided at the beginning of the run to use the normal loot settings. With this only being a 5-man instance, and with only one person not being from the guild, there were few concerns over people who might “ninja” loot.

Rherit> (teamspeak) “Leather gloves... Joriy are you an enchanter? “

Joiry> (teamspeak) “Yeah, let me win the roll and I will disenchant (DE) them for the guild bank.”²⁹

Ayrav> Passes.

Joriy> Rolls 22 out of 100.

Wheatley> Passes.

Tyrion> Passes.

Rherit> Passes.

Joriy receives [Starlight Gauntlets]!

Ayrav> (teamspeak) “I hate that instances drop loot worthless to the classes that are playing. If we had a druid it’d be fine, but what a waste.”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Meh, with how fast these runs are you can do them often enough to get the loot you want, it is fine.”

Wheatley> (group) “A shame, those would have been useful if they were cloth, if only I could wear leather.”

Ayrav> (guildchat) “Oh good, Calli’s still single then, I have a chance yet!”

²⁸ The colour of an item represents its rarity. Generally speaking, bosses will always drop a blue or purple item. Occasionally, they will drop a second lesser item that is green or white or grey. In general terms, the only items used by players this high are Green or above. Green represents uncommon items, Blue rare items, and Purple Epic items. In addition to this there are Orange items which are classified as Legendary and are the most difficult to get in the game. Items, much like players have their own level. This level represents both the general quality of the item (items get better the higher level they are) and the level you must achieve to use the item. Gear is often restricted to different classes. Within the game there are four types of armour of varying degrees of protection (from least to greatest): Cloth, Leather, Mail, Plate. While Cloth wearers can only wear Cloth, Plate wearers can wear Plate, Mail, Leather, or Cloth, although it is not always recommended. <http://www.wowwiki.com/Equipment> last viewed 29 September 2011.

²⁹ Disenchanting, rather than being a class based ability, is an ability given via the enchanting profession. Every player is allowed to learn two professions that help improve characters in the game.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Alright, disenchanting. Let’s get a move on, I don’t want to spend all night doing just one run of this place.”

Calli> (guildchat) “Yeah, a fat chance.”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Agreed, at this point I will only be able to do a single run before I have to go pick up my kid. I’m sure another tank will log on to take my spot though, we have so many in guild right now.”

Ayrav> (guildchat) “Hey, I will take what I can get.”

Calli> (guildchat) “LOL”

Urenial> (guildchat) “What about your friend, is she single? Does she play WoW?”

Calli> (guildchat) “Yes, she’s single. No, she doesn’t play WoW. To answer your next question before you answer it: NO! I will not introduce you to her, I would never want a friend of mine to date you!”

Urenial> (guildchat) “Hey, what is so wrong with me? I have a wonderful entry level job, I only drink on raid nights, and I only play 20-35 hours of WoW a week! I’m a catch.”

Calli> (guildchat) “Yeah... right. ROFL. =P”³⁰³¹

The group continues on and slowly clears through the trash mobs on their way to the next boss. The caves open up and show their true size during this portion of the instance. The group is fighting on a series of cliff sides and bridges until they reach a large industrial-like structure and their foes change. Crossing the final bridge into this industrialized building, it is apparent to the group that something has changed. The green and lush underground environment that was their scenery before has changed. The structure is vibrant red and orange, and the Broken, a race that was once Draenei, are slaves to the Naga working within it, mining the earth for some unknown source of power. Upon entering the structure, you see the slaves working. There are guards, predominately of Naga heritage but also several Broken patrols, that walk back and forth to ensure the slaves are working at their hardest.

³⁰ ROFL – Rolling on the floor laughing. Is a common term used as a replacement to LOL. In general, it is used to emphasize that you think something is funnier than just a normal ‘LOL’ would warrant. Smiley faces are also commonly used to help convey meaning within the text. Since emotions and sarcasm are difficult for many people to convey in text, emoticons and generalized phrases are often used to help with expression.

³¹ I noticed that conversations with “girl gamers” within the guilds were often rather playful and flirtatious, and I feel as though most of the men initiating this type of flirtation are not the type of men who would necessarily do the same in real life situations, even with the same women. This would be an interesting avenue for future study, but was not a major focus for this one.

Surprisingly, upon initiating a fight with the Naga patrol, they call the slaves to aid them against the groups' attack! What looked initially like a fight with just a few enemies turns out to be a very slow and arduous crawl to through the chambers of the building. The group reaches a stairwell and heads up. From the second floor of the build you can see the centre of the structure. The second floor loops around a large pool of water with gigantic tubes jetting out from the centre that have a flat top that forms a pedestal above the water. One of these tubes arches up towards the second floor where the group stands and acts like a bridge to get over to the pedestal.

Rherit> (teamspeak) "Awesome room, but I do not see anything on the pedestal. I thought there would be a boss there or something."

Joriy> (teamspeak) "Once we finish clearing these mobs, there will be a boss there. If you look down into the water you'll see the next boss patrolling around. We'll be tanking him up top, I will explain the fight in just a second."

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "Actually, I found a better place to tank him on youtube the other day, the rest of it will be the same, just a different location"

Joriy> (teamspeak) "Oh wow, cool. Yeah that's no problem, I will let you explain the fight this go-round though."

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "Hokay, this fight is going to be taking place on the pedestal. Do you guys see those tubes over on the left side of the wall? Good. I'm going to be pulling Ghaz'an right over there and putting my back against the wall. Ghaz'an can knock back whoever he's attacking and because he has an AoE attack that only hits things he facing, it's better that no one but the tank gets hit with it. DPS and healers are going to be on his sides, do not attack him from behind! He has a tail swipe ability that can do some brutal damage as well as knock you back. If you fall into the water, there are fish down there that will keep attacking you and could kill you out of the line of sight of the healer.³² This boss hits really hard, so Wheatley, you need to keep me topped up at all times. The rest of you just do your jobs and do not take damage! Alright?"

Rherit> "Alright! I love tank and spank bosses."

Wheatley> "Got it."

Ayrav> "I'll be sure to stay away from his tail and his mouth, yowza!"

Joriy> "Everyone ready? Let's get in position, Wheatley be ready to heal as he pull the boss over to

³² Most spells in the game require what is called line of sight (LOS). Basically, the spell will not work unless your character in the game can visually see the person or Non Player Character (NPC).

the tank spot!”

Tyrion pulls Ghaz’an over to the tank spot. Ghaz’an is an absolutely massive three-headed hydra. Two of his heads, the ones on the sides, are slightly smaller with short sharp horns on them. The central head is much larger and strangely has only one eye, just above its mouth that is both frightening to look at and deadly. This lizard like creature is incredibly venomous and deals massive poison damage to the tank. Wheatley is fortunately up to the task of healing Tyrion during this battle and the fight starts smoothly. Ghaz’an knocks Tyrion back several times, but because of his tanking location, he is just pushed up against the wall. This effectively keeps Ghaz’an from turning and killing the rest of the team by accident. Even though Ghaz’an deals a lot of damage, the hydra does not have a lot of health, and soon the DPS has taken down the beast and the fight is over.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Now that is how it is done! Down in less than three minutes, great work guys.”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Wheatley, that was one awesome display of how to heal, all you man.”

Wheatley> (group) “Thanks! It really wasn’t so difficult, no one else was taking damage so it made it easy to keep you topped up!”

Rherit> (teamspeak) “Alright, hopefully the loot is better than last time! Let’s see what he’s dropped.”

Rherit clicks on the remains of the boss and the item pops up on the screen for everyone to roll on. The item dropped is the [\[Talisman of Tenacity\]](#), a necklace that is very clearly a Player versus Plauer (PVP) item, not a Player versus Everyone (PVE) item.

Tyrion> (group) “Wow, I haven’t seen that dropped in here, that has a lot of stamina and resilience on it! Could really use it for my Arena team.”

Rherit> (teamspeak) “I have no use for it, I tried out the arena’s for awhile but I found PVP far too frustrating. I think I’ll pass.”

Wheatley> (group) “Frustrating, I know it is fantastic for warriors, but this is good for any class in PVP. Mind if I roll?”

Tyrion> (group) “Oh, I know, this is a great starter to mid-level piece for arena’s. It can really save you from spending your PVP points elsewhere and upgrading more important gear. Feel free to roll I will not be offended. Thanks for asking though!”

Ayrav> (group) “I have the PVP necklace already so I do not need it.”

Wheatley rolls 56 out of 100.

Tyrion rolls 78 out of 100.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Going to have to roll as well, I’ve just started doing 3v3 Arenas.”

Joriy rolls 23 out of 100.

Tyrion receives [\[Talisman of Tenacity\]](#)!

Wheatley> (group) “Grats.”

Ayrav> (group) “Nice, grats Tyrion.”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Oh well, you probably deserve it more, you actually have three good arena teams.”³³

Rherit> (teamspeak) “The instance still hasn’t dropped any useful raiding upgrades for us yet, sort of frustrating! Grats anyway Tyrion!”

Rherit looks around the room and, for once, does not see an obvious continuing point to the instance.

Rherit> (teamspeak) “So uh, where do we go from here?”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Alright guys, just follow me!”

Joriy jumps from the central pedestal down into the water. Once you are at water level, you can see that directly across from the path that brought the group into the central chamber is a tiny crack in the foundations. The group swims over to this breach in the wall and jump down. Once outside the building you are stuck in a tunnel filled with the standard cave flora of glowing mushrooms and spores and several generic bushes scattered about. To get through to the next boss, the team clears through some massive swarms of Lykul Wasps. While frightening to look at, these wasps pose little threat to the team and they clear through them quickly. When they reach the end of the tunnel it is apparent that there are two directions to go. To the right is a small enclave with a Broken and what appears to be his pet bear.

³³ There are two different controlled forms of PVP in WoW. Battlegrounds and Arenas. Arenas are small premade teams that consist of 2vs2 3vs3 or 5vs5. Battlegrounds can be joined in groups as well, but consist of larger teams and fighting areas. PVP culture is drastically different from PVE culture within the game and is seen as the more competitive and skilled section of the game by PVP players. While many players play both, PVP is more of a niche and in general results in far more heated conversation amongst players.

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Here’s the next boss, this fight can be pretty rough. Drink up and I’ll discuss the strategy involved for this one. Tyrion, can you tank both mobs at once on this one?”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “With Wheatley healing it shouldn’t be a problem. I’ve done it a few times and I think Wheatley is up for the damage output.”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Great, well there’s a few ways we can do this, but we’ll try it the way I’ve always successfully done it first, and if it doesn’t pan out we can give one of the other strategies a go. Okay, so this is actually a two boss battle, but you can only kill Murkblood Musel’ek. His bear is actually a Tauren Shaman that he has taken as his pet, and at 20% the Shaman will go back to his Tauren form and walk out of the fight. What we’re going to do is have Tyrion go in and tank both, he’s going to get a lot of threat up on the bear first, and then start tanking Murkblood. The DPS’s job is to take the bear down to 20% health as quickly as possible so we only have to deal with Murkblood on his own. Musel’ek can freeze all of us in place and randomly charge the healer and dps, so Wheatley, you have your job cut out for you. The tank is the main priority, we can lose a DPSer if absolutely necessary but the second Tyrion is down we’re all dead.”

Wheatley> (group) “Any positioning concerns?”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “Not particularly, I’ve heard that if you all group up it makes it more difficult for Musel’ek to gain distance to do range attacks, and that he charges less frequently, but we I have never experienced any major problems by not doing that. They have such low health the fight does not take that long anyway. Alright, looking at everyone’s health and mana bars, it looks like we are ready to go. Any further questions?”

Rherit> (teamspeak) “Any particular curses you want me to apply on these guys?”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “I’d say apply Curse of Elements on the bear to up your damage as well as mine, and while we are downing the bear, keep Curse of Agony and your other DoTs up on Musel’ek. That way we have less damage to deal to him later and the fight should go faster.”

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Alright, everyone ready? I’m going to pull!”

Tyrion pulls the boss, first attacking the bear to get his threat up, and then Musel’ek himself. Rherit quickly puts up Curse of Exhaustion on the bear and then throws his DoTs onto the Musel’ek so that he’ll take more damage while they take out the bear. Rherit’s keyboard setup is rather simple, and most of his common spells are situated in his top 5 numerical keys above his keyboard. Many players have special gaming keyboards with more buttons to allow more key bindings to be used, but Rherit has always preferred a really basic mechanical keyboard. Despite his flat mate’s

annoyance at the loud clacking the keyboard makes, Rherit thinks the sound is relaxing, and it gives the keys more weight, reminding him of old mechanical typewriters and how they feel. Keeping threat on two targets is difficult for a tank, and because Rherit is doing damage to both the bear and Musel'ek, Tyrion starts to lose a foothold on his threat.

Tyrion> (teamspeak) Rherit, you're going to pull aggro off me if you aren't careful on Musel'ek pull back your DPS!

Rherit> (teamspeak) Sorry! My mind was elsewhere.

Rherit stops attacking Musel'ek. Unfortunately, DoTs have a long duration in which the spells inflict damage to the enemy, and his threat continues to rise. Eventually, Tyrion loses aggro and Rherit takes a few hits and dies. However, unlike when Ayrav took damage earlier in the instance, there is a way for Rherit to come back to life. Warlocks have the ability to create what is called a Soulstone. These powerful items are usually saved for healers, but in normal instances Rherit sometimes uses the soulstone on himself. The effects last for an hour, and once applied to a target, allow it to come back to life once after to being killed.

Rherit> (teamspeak) "Shit, that guy hits hard! It's okay, I had a soulstone up I'll wait for Tyrion to get a hold again and respawn. Wheatley throw me a quick heal right as I come back."

Wheatley, doesn't respond. It's difficult for those without microphones to communicate while in a battle. Typing risks missing an important heal for Wheatley, and he just assumes that Rherit knows he heard him. Other than Rherit's death the fight is going as expected

Rherit> (teamspeak) "Coming back now!"

Joriy> (teamspeak) "About time, pay more attention to the threat meters when you come back!"

Rherit> (teamspeak) "Hah-yeah, sorry about that. It'll be hard for me to dish enough damage to pull because I spawn with so little mana.

Rherit respawns and Wheatley immediately heals him. By this time the bear is already down to 40% health. Ayrav and Joriy have been doing decent damage to him and even without Rherit the fight was going pretty well. With the addition to Rherit doing damage they get the bear down to 20%. He changes back into a Tauren named Windcaller Claw and says as he walks back to the corner, "How embarrassing to be taken as a pet by a hunter!" The group now focuses all their attention on Musel'ek. His health starts to drop... 80% and soon after 50%.

Joriy> (teamspeak) "Going great guys, let's finish him off!"

The group kills Musel'ek quickly and upon death shouts out, "Well... done..." Rherit immediately goes over to the corpse and looks to see what has dropped. It was the [\[Zangartooth Shortblade\]](#)! This dagger turns out to be a huge upgrade for both Wheatley and Rherit. It has substantial stats, and boasts a huge amount of increased spell power and hit rating.³⁴³⁵

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "Whew! Double tanking still gives me a bit of a rush!"

Rherit> (teamspeak) "I can imagine, great job, that aggro steal was completely my fault."

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "It's alright, we killed him anyway."

Wheatley> (group) "Sorry I didn't respond to you in the fight Rherit, I hate typing while healing. Wow that's an amazing main hand dagger."

Rherit> (teamspeak) "Dude, you're amazing, very well timed heal on my respawn, figured you heard what I said. Yeah it is, I think I'm going to have to roll on it if you don't mind."

Wheatley> (group) "No problem, I'm going to roll on it as well, hope I win! LOL!"

Joriy> (teamspeak) "Luckily for you two, I already have a better weapon setup otherwise there would be three of us rolling for that!"

Joriy passes.

Tyrion passes.

Ayrav passes.

Wheatley rolls 92 out of 100.

Rherit rolls 96 out of 100.

Rherit receives [\[Zangartooth Shortblade\]](#)!

³⁴ While I won't go into great detail about stats and their individual importance, the entire end-game experience is about upgrading the stats that are significant to individual classes. Most casters are very concerned with spell power and hit rating. Spell power, simply put, increases the power your spells have. If you do damage, this means your damage is higher, if you are a healer, it means you heal for more. Hit rating, increases the chance that your spells will successfully hit against higher level targets, and is more important to damage casters than to healers.

³⁵ It is common for items to drop that multiple people have great use for. Most of the time this happens, the people rolling are very civilized about the process, but there are occasions when someone rolls for loot that is far better for one class than the other, and it becomes a serious issue with the people in the instance or raid.

Rherit> (group) “Woah! Thought for sure you would win when I saw you roll 92, amazing!”³⁶

Wheatley> (group) “Grats man, I thought I won it with that roll. It’s probably better for your warlock anyway, I didn’t really need the hit. Just that spell power was such a huge upgrade for me. Hope you didn’t mind me rolling.

Rherit> (group) “Hey, with the weapon you have, I can completely understand that as an upgrade, you were fine rolling don’t worry about it so much!”

The upgrade is substantial enough that even with the enchantments Rherit has on his previous weapon, this one has better damage output. Rherit decides to equip it immediately and use it for the rest of the run.³⁷

Rherit> (guild) “This PUG healer we have in our group is pretty good isn’t he? Seems nice, we should recommend he take a look at our application, we’re a little short on priests right now.

Ayrav> (teamspeak) “Alright guys let’s look at the loot before the corpse despawns!”

Joriy> (guild) “Yeah, I checked out his gear too, it’s pretty solid, I’ll send him a whisper after the run.”

Calli> (guild) “What’s his name? I want to look him up on the WoW webpage in a sec.”

Joriy> (guild) “His name is Wheatley, give him a look, I’ll figure out if he’s even old enough to join the guild.”

Rherit> (guild) “Oh and also: [\[Zangartooth Shortblade\]](#)! Whoooo!

Calli> (guild) “Grats! Now maybe you’ll finally do some damage in a raid LOL!”

Joriy> (guild) “PWNED!”³⁸

Calli> (guild) “Oh, I posted this on the forums, but I should bring it up here as well. We’re trying

³⁶ During portions of the game that are not intensive for the players, it is common for conversations to be held simultaneously through two different methods of communication. While Rherit has been mainly using teamspeak to talk, at this point in time he has decided to switch back to typing in the group chat. Often these types of decisions are made because someone is either conversing with another person in real life, or they are doing something that is loud and somewhat disruptive to talking while playing, such as eating.

³⁷ It is common that even when a player receives an item better than their current, that the modifications the player has made to the item (through enchanting and jewel-crafting professions) they already have, make it so they have to wait to use their new loot.

³⁸ PWN is an interesting slang term used by gamers. PWN is used to describe getting defeated, either verbally, or in game. The term probably stems originally from a common typo of “Own” as P and O are so close to each other on the standard keyboard. The word is commonly said over voice-chat and has made it into common gamer lingo despite its lack of a vowel. I have most commonly heard it pronounced either as “pone(ed)” or “pawn(ed)” but there are many variations to pronunciation. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pwn> last viewed 29 September 2011.

to plan a group to go to BlizzCon this year, just like we did the past two years. If people are interested in trying to book hotels together and such, use the forum post to access it. Last year we had 10 people show from guild, and we'd like even more this year! It's becoming too expensive to have the guild meets in Vegas AND go to BlizzCon so this year we're only doing the conference."³⁹

Joriy> (whispers to Rherit) "Oh right, you should totally go to that! I went last year with them and it was a blast. It'd be really fun to meet you in real life! "

Rherit> (whispers to Joriy) "I'll have to think about it. I've been thinking about going there, but the tickets are really pricey so I'll have to see if I can budget it in. It'd be great to meet the guild in real life though!"

Joriy> (whispers to Rherit) "Yeah. I've been to a few of the guild meets, both the big one and one with just some of the local guys. They're really cool, and most of the big interactions are nights out drinking so everyone lightens up quickly. It can be a little awkward at first, but once you get to know everyone it's a blast."

Rherit> (guild) "Awesome Calli. I'll take a look at my schedule and see if I can make it!"

After the group has healed and regained their mana pools, they continue their instance. Now that they have defeated Musel'ek they turn left and cross a narrow bridge and fight their way through more of the now familiar fauna of the Underbog including some more Fungal Giants. Only one boss remains in the instance, and after fighting their way through a narrow tunnel they can see the final room. The room opens up and in the center of it is the final boss, The Black Stalker. The Black Stalker is "the great mother of the marsh walkers" and towers above all previous beasts within the Underbog. She stands on three tripod-like legs that extend upwards to her torso that is a pyramid-esque shape. Surrounding the room is a stream of water that is produced by a massive waterfall that engulfs the circular wall of the room. The group stops before the entrance, and waits for the instructions on the boss fight.⁴⁰

Joriy> (teamspeak) "One sec guys, I'm a little rusty on this fight, looking it up on wowwiki to check strat."

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "No problem, I could explain it for you if you wanted."

Joriy> (teamspeak) "Nah I'm already alt-tabbed and on the webpage, I'll just read it out from there."

³⁹ BlizzCon, is Blizzard's annual conference about new games and upcoming updates to World of Warcraft. It's a highly anticipated event every year for the player community, and they give many exclusive rewards to players who attend.

⁴⁰ http://www.wowwiki.com/The_Black_Stalker last viewed 29 September 2011.

Okay, right, I remember this fight now. Tyrion is going to be tanking her right in the center of the room. Tyrion, make sure to turn Black Stalker immediately away from us so that Ayrav can attack from the back. Black Stalker has a few abilities, and it is going to be another healing heavy fight, but hopefully we down her quickly because she does not have a lot of health. We have to really watch out for her Static Charge and Chain Lightning spells as they both do serious damage. To avoid the group taking serious damage from Static Charge we need to keep spread out, just make sure to stay in range of Wheatley so he does not have to waste time running to heal you. One second guys... oh wait, it's only the parents calling. I'll just ring them back tomorrow. Where were we? Right, there is one last ability to be careful about, and that is that she can use levitate on us and lift us off the ground, it is dispellable, but I'd say only take it off the tank or rogue as the casters can still cast from the air. Ah uhm, one last thing I remember from the last time I was here. If we have problems, the boss can be reset by going back into the tunnel we came in. Everyone got it?"

They are all ready and the fight begins by Tyrion charging the Black Stalker and turning her around. The damage the Black Stalker does is quickly apparent and Tyrion's health drops about 3000 health in just a second. Wheatley, busy healing other people in the group doesn't have time to get a heal off fast enough and Tyrion dies. The Black Stalker turns and starts attacking Ayrav, who was next on the threat meter. Ayrav tries to use his rogue skill vanish, but it does not work and the Black stalker kills him as well. The Black Stalker quickly takes out Rherit and Joriy and then all of a sudden runs back to the center of the room. Wheatley, was quick enough to make it out of the room and into the tunnel to reset the boss.

Tyrion> (teamspeak) "That was a real fluke, I got hit by the Chain Lightning and the Static Charge in two seconds, and she had a few critical strike hits on me at the same time. So happy Wheatley reset the fight, I do not think I have time for a run back at this point before I have to go pick up my kid."

Joriy> (teamspeak) "Yeah, quick thinking getting out of the room, it all happened so fast!"

Wheatley> (group) "Got luck, she was just about to hit me when she reset, I'll try and res you guys, some of you are in pretty tough spots, hopefully I don't aggro her bringing you back to life."⁴¹

Wheatley successfully brings the team back to life and after everyone has regained their health and mana, the group is ready for another try on the boss.

⁴¹ Res is short for resurrect, an ability that Priests have to bring party members back to life when out of combat. When someone is brought back to life, they respawn on the priest, rather than where they died. This is essential to the usefulness of the spell, as if any of the members in this particular instance were to be brought back to life where they died, they would be immediately killed again by the boss.

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Alright, everyone ready? We need to down her this time because I literally have to leave here in 10 minutes or I’ll be late to pick up my son.”

The fight starts again, and Tyrion is hit with another hard combination of attacks. This time Wheatley is ready for them and gets a few critical heals off to keep Tyrion alive. The rest of the group is taking serious damage as well, but Wheatley manages to keep them alive as well. The Black Stalker’s total health is not great, and with the strong healing the team is able to bring down the beast with little difficulty on the second try.

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Thanks, guys, I hate to run but I have to get going. Joriy can I get a portal to town before I log out?”

Joriy> (teamspeak) “No problem. Let’s take a look at the loot, make sure it is not anything you can use.”

Joriy clicks on the corpse of the Black Stalker and the group has their roll icons pop-up on screen. The drop is [[Robes of the Augurer](#)], a very powerful cloth chest piece! It provides significant increases to spirit, intellect, and stamina, as well as spell power and three sockets for jewels.

Tyrion> (teamspeak) “Nothing I need, I’ll take the portal and run. Great playing with you guys as always! Good healing Wheaty!”

Wheatley> (group) “Haha, thanks I had fun. Anyone mind if I roll on that chest-piece? It’s amazing!”

Rherit> (group) “I already won the dagger, so I’m going to pass even though it’d be a small upgrade for me.”

Joriy creates a portal to Shattrath.⁴²

Tyrion leaves the group.

Joriy> (group) “There is really nothing in these instances that is an upgrade for me so you guys do not have to worry about me rolling on items tonight.”

Ayrav passes.

Joriy passes.

⁴² While Warlocks have the ability to summon people to them, Mages can open portals to take people other places. These portals are used during instances and raids to take everyone back to the major cities without having to use a hearthstone, which has a much longer cool down on it.

Rherit passes.

Wheatley rolls 9 out of 100.

Wheatley receives [\[Robes of the Augurer\]](#)!

Wheatley> (group) “Wow thanks! It wasn’t the item I was looking for, but it is a huge upgrade for me! I’m going to have to make some jewels to put into it to get the full benefit, but it will be amazing!”

Rherit> (group) “I always feel bad if I roll on another item in the same instance if I’ve already won a great item earlier in it. Besides, I don’t have any use for the spirit on that chest, and I’m looking at a few other upgrades that are better anyway.”

Rherit> (group) “Did you want to do any other runs tonight? I think we were going to try and do all the other instances down here, just have to get another tank. There are a few on in guild right now so it shouldn’t take long to find another!

Joriy> (whispers to Wheatley) “Hey there, I couldn’t help but notice you are without a guild right now. Are you by any chance looking for one? We’re pretty impressed with your healing so far, and we have a shortage of priests. You’d have to fill out an application but we could easily do a rush-job of it since you’ve already been on a run with us.”

Wheatley> (whispers to Joriy) “Hmm, I’ll have to think about it, I just left my guild the other day because of disagreements with the management. You guys seem pretty cool, I’ll have to take a look at the webpage. If that’s alright.”

Joriy> (whispers to Wheatley) “Sure! Here it is, the only thing I should ask about up front is your age. We are strictly and 18 or older guild (mostly older) and are going to be staying that way.”

Wheatley> (whispers to Joriy) “That actually was one of the main things I was going to look at LOL! I’m 27, and my last guild was really immature even though they were pretty well progressed. I’m still pretty new to late-game so I don’t have a lot of gear, and they weren’t particularly interested in helping me gear up for raids.”

Wheatley> (group) “I’ll be on for a few more hours tonight so I’m up for some more runs with you guys! I think I can work out how to get my microphone working again as well so I can chat on team speak. Oh, I guess I should say this so it isn’t too much of a surprise once I talk on teamspeak. I’m actually a girl! I play a male character because when I started playing I got really annoyed at

the attention my female avatar was given.”⁴³

Joriy> (group) “Ha! Even more reason for us to recruit you to the guild. Tyrion’s wife does the same thing, so it isn’t too surprising!”

Ayrav> (group) “Cool. Well, let’s find a tank and get going!”

After they leave the instance, they arrive back in the original room they were summoned to. The group finds another tank from the guild and continues to play. Rherit plays for several more hours before logging off and going to sleep. Wheatley eventually applies to the guild and is accepted, becoming one of the more consistent raiders.

⁴³ People playing the game do not always play avatars that are the same as their gender in real life. There are many reasons for this, and multiple studies regarding it so I have opted not to discuss it at great length within my study.

Analysis of the WoW Narrative

The goal for this narrative was to illustrate the complexity of playing complex online games such as WoW, and especially the social interactions that occur during them. This narrative represents about two hours of conversation and game-play within the game. While many researchers have already discussed what game-play is like within WoW (Nardi, 2009; Bainbridge, 2010; Ward, 2011), I feel that the narrative form used in this dissertation provides a unique and relatively accurate example of the communications that occur during an instance. Nardi provides plenty of dialogue directly from the game (Nardi, 2009, pp. 3-4, 23); however, the dialogue does not give the same perspective that is allowed through the use of narrative. The narrative allowed for seamless representation of dialogue rather than excerpts of dialogue followed by description and explanation. Nardi criticises much of the research done on these games stating that, “Much academic scholarship on play is so serious, so removed from the lightness of play, as to render the phenomenon under study nearly unrecognizable” (Nardi, 2009, p. 203). By using the narrative form, I was able to include a lot of the lightness that is common within the game itself. Conversations in-between battles that are light and joking are common, and I agree with Nardi in that so much of the research currently available has lost the sense of that.

Despite trying to make this an accurate representation, the narrative cannot convey the full extent of conversation that occurs within a two hour time span within a game. The Knights of Valor chat over a two hour period would actually have almost continuous conversation over their guild chat, even during a non raiding night such as the one described. That said, the characters in the story are running an instance, an area which is only accessible to their group. Instances take up a considerable amount of concentration and I do feel that this gives a fairly accurate representation of perceived conversation during that time period. That is to say, the members of the guild who are in the instance, would not read the entirety of the conversations going on in guild chat and would only notice and respond to certain players within the guild. I myself found it hard to keep track of conversations while in the game, and would often find that I had missed several conversations while in an instance. While the use of logging can allow you to go back and see these conversations, there is no way as a researcher to be involved with each one at any given time. As every player has this basic limit of what they can read built into them, I do not feel as though it was a deterrent to my research. Rather, it gave me a more accurate representation of the gamers’ experience.

The narrative includes several different conversations occurring at once, but in the game it is common to have even more than the narrative suggests. This limited representation is largely due to constraints of writing a cohesive narrative, but I also feel that most of the other text being sent to the players themselves is ignored. Messages from different groups/individuals are colour coded to

allow for quick identification. Players quickly get accustomed to the colour messages have and find themselves ignoring text that is not either useful to their immediate playing of the game, or from the social groups that they are involved in. It is popular to modify the games chat systems to help facilitate easier communication between players. During my participant observation, I kept the chat interface largely intact, only modifying minor things such as text size which is already customisable without the use of add-ons. The chat interface itself has a significant impact on the ability players have to communicate, and the add-ons available are equally significant and can drastically change the ease of communication within the game. For example, there is an add-on called WoW Instant Messenger (WIM).⁴⁴ This add-on modifies the WoW chat interface to open up new windows when someone private messages you. This add-on imitates many external CMC methods such as AOL Instant Messenger (AIM).⁴⁵ This additional familiarisation to the interface can help ease a players communication within the game. It also simplifies tracking conversations. When playing with the original chat interface it is easy to lose track of conversations simply because they are all contained within the same window. If conversations are moving quickly, you will have to scroll up the chat log to view what people have previously said. WIM removes this hassle, making it so each new person who private messages you gets their own individual window. This has its downsides, especially on smaller resolution screens. New windows take up more space, and less screen real-estate means it is more difficult to play the game itself. Many add-ons have easily accessible on-off switches because of this, allowing players to pop-up windows when having conversations only to hide them when they are occupied fighting in the game. WIM is a great example of the greater modding community creating significant changes to the Graphical User Interface (GUI) to more easily accommodate features important to the individual.

Perhaps one of the most significant topics brought up within the narrative is the guilds use of Dragon Kill Points (DKP) within the game. DKP, as explained earlier, is a scoring method used within the game to distribute wealth from raids to the players participating. The better your attendance to raids are, the more likely you are to win items. This guild decision actually helps solidify the “regular” player base for the guild. Players feel as if they are obligated to attend, or that they would let their guild-mates down if they missed a raid. This encourages players within the guild to use WoW as their single social event on raiding evenings. Players often discussed missing other Real Life (RL) social events in order to attend raids. Players who did not attend because of events taking place in RL were occasionally criticised for not attending the raid because of their event. Within the narrative this significance is not fully conveyed. This is largely because outside

⁴⁴ <http://wow.curse.com/downloads/wow-addons/details/wim-3.aspx> last accessed September 30, 2011.

⁴⁵ <http://www.aim.com/> last accessed September 30, 2011.

of raids themselves, the DKP structure is rarely discussed. Guilds occasionally vote on changing how DKP is given out to players, but the significance it has on attendance to raids is not conveyed in the dialogue between players, and therefore their social significance to the guild itself.

From an anthropological perspective, being a new ethnographer to a game like WoW is not necessarily a severe disadvantage. Finding people interested in talking to you about the game's community and the game itself is not difficult. Everyone in the game is new at some point, and players often encourage real life friends to try the game and to play with them. Additionally, players are often creating new characters to level during periods of time in which they are not raiding. This results in an atmosphere in which many people are willing to help you, both in the process of levelling, and in teaching you the complex language that goes along with playing such a game.

While the narrative references things like the guild forums, and IRC chat rooms outside of the game, it does not provide a proper glimpse into the guild interactions via these CMC tools. For the most part, these external tools simply provide further interaction for the players during hours in which they cannot play the game itself. Based on many of the posts viewed on guild forums, there are more conversations about general topics discussed outside of the game than inside. Conversations are often driven back to the game itself when you are playing. Naturally, there are conversations regarding game mechanics and needing help with instances or quests that help drive conversations. The forums themselves have a subset of topics in which you are to elect where to post. For example, there is a General Forum to post about anything that is not related to the game itself, which was the most common forum posted in by the groups that I studied. Then there are class specific forums, places where players can ask other players of the guild questions about game mechanics, items, class builds and have their questions answered. However, the General Forum seems to be the most common place for conversations to occur. As my main goal was to create as detailed an account of what game-play and conversation is like in the game, some of these other forms of communication could not be emphasised within the narrative.

During the course of research, many events occur that are not foreseen, predictable, or typical to the environment you are working in. While I was researching, Activision Blizzard made an announcement that sparked a huge amount of controversy within WoW. On July 6th 2010 Blizzard announced on the WoW forums that players would be required to use their real names (Albrechtslund, 2011). The announcement was stated as such,

“The first and most significant change is that in the near future, anyone posting or replying to a post on official Blizzard forums will be doing so using their Real ID — that is, their real-life first and last name

— with the option to also display the name of their primary in-game character alongside it. These changes will go into effect on all StarCraft II forums with the launch of the new community site prior to the July 27 release of the game, with the World of Warcraft site and forums following suit near the launch of Cataclysm. The classic Battle.net forums, including those for Diablo II and Warcraft III, will be moving to a new legacy forum section with the release of the StarCraft II community site and at that time will also transition to using Real ID for posting.” Via- (Sixdee, 2010, p. 1)

This post on the WoW forums was responded to a total of 49,896 times accounting for 2,495 pages of forum posts (Albrechtslund, 2011). Responses were so negative that this event reached major news outlets across the world (Benedetti, 2010; Fahey, 2010; Farrelly, 2010; Firth, 2010; Grayson, 2010; Welsh, 2010; WSJ, 2010; Molina, 2010). RealID, as the system is called, is something new to all Blizzard games, and its impacts have yet to be fully realised within the game. Discussing RealID with players, and viewing the opinions of it on the forums have shown mixed interest in the system. RealID in a sense is nothing new. Players were giving out their personal identities well before it was ever created (Nardi, 2009, p. 21). Nardi states that many players already knew each others' real names and that they saw their characters as “an extension of their existing social life” (Nardi, 2009, p. 21). While players may see their characters as part of their existing social life, they clearly do not want their character to be publically known as them. With social media being attributed to people getting fired from their jobs, and playing games like WoW used against people running for public office, it is no wonder that people are not interested in another forum in which they can be directly identified (BBC, 2012; Eidelson, 2012; Gray, 2012). The WoW community was furious, and many threatened to quit the game if the proposal was ever enacted (Albrechtslund, 2011). This social movement by the players was initially going to be a major portion of my research. Unfortunately, I was unaware that Blizzard forum posts disappeared over a certain period of time without being posted in, and the main thread that was a major focus had disappeared. Albrechtslund also tried to provide links to archived information about the RealID forum post, however the archives also no longer exist (Albrechtslund, 2011). This announcement was one of the more interesting events to arise during my research, and the issue of when players deem it okay to give real identity information to other players is something I would like to do further research on.

Continuum Introduction and History⁴⁶

Subspace, (now called Continuum) was an online game originally developed and released by Virgin Interactive Entertainment (VIE) on November 30th, 1997. The game is an over-the-top spaceship game in which players control ships that fight in outer-space.⁴⁷ While the game saw some initial success at release, VIE soon abandoned the game. Although this usually spells an end to online games, the community playing Subspace quickly found ways to build and put up their own servers to play on. Subspace still has many active servers today, making it one of the oldest continuously active online gaming communities in the world. Using an ethnographic approach, and with help from members of squads and staff within the game, I have researched one of the largest current servers (zones) in Continuum, called Trench Wars. This tight knit international community has been playing either Continuum or Trench Wars for nearly a decade. This case study examines why this 2D spaceship game and the community itself have remained intact despite advances in online gaming since its release. To my knowledge, there has been never been any research done on this particular community. Subspace is rather unique in the online gaming world. It is a game in which the players maintain their own servers and even update the entire game client in order to continue enhancing the game. While other games have lost their commercial backing and had players create their own servers, this constitutes a high level of devotion by a community to keep both the servers active, the client updated, and the ideas new in order to maintain a healthy and active player community.

The origins of Subspace stem from a project originally called “Sniper” which was a simple gaming-program designed to test how much lag might occur on a large scale massively multiplayer game. Programmers Jeff Petersen and Rod Humble recognised the potential this program had to actually becoming a game itself, and began work on Subspace. In February of 1996 open beta testing began for the game. Even during beta testing (during which there were only four playable ships), the game showed much promise, and by the end of beta testing there were well over 1,500 people on during peak hours. The game was commercially released in December of 1997. It originally retailed for the price of \$27.99 in the United States. Original reviews of the game were positive, but many of the community members who participated in the beta did not wish to purchase the game itself and a software crack was written to allow people to play without having to pay. The

⁴⁶ Please note: most of this history was collected from multiple players within the game, as well as a few fan web-pages outside of the game. As far as accuracy of the information, I have done my best to confirm as much of it as possible, but there are portions where I have had to take the word of the players on its accuracy. As this game is considered ‘abandoned-ware’ there is very little accessible information about it through the developers, and I was unable to get a hold of anyone who helped develop it.

⁴⁷ Over the top refers to the visual appearance of the game. Over the top games tend to be two-dimensional and give the player an eagle-eye view of their avatar and surroundings.

biggest additions to the final release of the game were the ability to create community-run servers (non SVS servers), and the addition of the final and 8th ship of the game. These cracks continued to be refined, and eventually VIE abandoned the game entirely sometime in 1998. The game consisted of a series of servers called Zones. Originally all zones used Standard VIE Settings (SVS). These settings consisted of pre-set parameters for each of the eight ships in the game. When VIE went under, the majority of their commercial assets were purchased by Electronic Arts, but Subspace was abandoned.

When the SVS servers went down, the remaining ones were player made servers. This change saw the loss of the majority of players the game once had. The small servers people were running could not handle many people, and because there was no central billing server, players were divided and were unable to communicate across zones. The majority of the post-SVS zones were identical in both map and settings, but it quickly became popular to create zones with different objectives, maps, and ship settings. The population continued to plummet until Baudchaser created the SSCx project in November of 1998. The idea behind this project was to create a SS Council, uniting the servers under the SSC central billing servers. In addition to having central billing, the server client itself was upgraded, preventing many of the then popular cheating programs from working within the servers. The real importance of this was uniting the largest zones onto a few centralized servers. People could once again communicate across zones and the community stabilized, albeit much lower than the initial population of the game.

Unfortunately, Subspace was still plagued by the population's easy access to cheating programs that allowed them to become invulnerable within the game. It was not until a member of the Trench Wars community created a new program for Subspace, that server populations began to regrow. Priitk (Priit Kasesalu) created a program called BanG, that greatly enhanced the SSCx servers ability to ban players for cheating over long periods of time. No longer could people cheat in one zone, get banned, and just starting playing another. There were finally repercussions for using illegal programs, and cheating was largely removed from the game at this time. Priitk and Mr. Ekted continued working on projects for Subspace and eventually released a completely new client for the game called Continuum. Continuum was released in 2001 and was the first major update to the Subspace client in over 5 years. This upgrade provided much needed features and support for servers that have allowed the game to keep the community it had been building.

Even with this update Continuum is a game that is graphically far behind the new releases of the gaming and MMO market, but is still able to maintain multiple servers with consistent populations. To understand why such an outdated game has been able to survive for 13 years, I have looked at both the programming behind the game, and the community that continues to play it.

Continuum Narrative

I discovered Continuum by accident, and it was not part of my original research design. I was viewing the webpage www.onrpg.com to look up some details on free to play MMOs when I came across a review of the game Continuum. I found the history of the game intriguing, and I wanted to see what the community was like first hand, and was amazed at how active the small community was, and the conversations they were having in game. Excited at this new find, I discussed with my advisors the possibility of adding this game to the research design. As explained earlier, Continuum is much older than WoW. Despite this, it still has an active player community, and in my opinion, one of the major reasons for this is its chat protocol. The communications allowed by the chat protocol within Continuum are just as complex and even have some advantages over modern day MMOs. Specifically two important factors allow for such an advantageous way to communicate. First, Continuum allows players to spectate in the game.⁴⁸ That is to say, their visual avatar is not always represented in the game itself.

Continuum allows for both external chat programs to join the server (meaning you never even have to log into the game client to talk to people who are in the game) and the game client itself has its own chat client when you alt-tab out of the game. This allows members of the community to stay in contact with players in the game while they are doing something else. Several players I talked to were actually at school or work while chatting in the game. While I do not condone using the chat-client during work or school hours, because of how inconspicuous the chat client is, and because it is so easy to use, many players keep it as long as their computer is on. This also means that while WoW players are often simultaneously playing the game and having discussions with players, Continuum players have a drastically different type of conversation when playing and when not playing. Additionally, Continuum as a game is often too intensive for detailed conversations to occur while playing. During competitive play, the only conversations a player has are directly related to the game play itself. That being said, the chats a player are in still continue to have conversations, it is just that the player actually playing chooses to ignore these conversations until his match is completed. There is even an option in the game to hide the chat completely, which some players opt to use during competitive play. Details about competitive play and when this might happen will be explained in the narrative. This is another instance in which the addition of the alt-tabbed chat client becomes a useful tool for communication to the player. It is amazingly easy to catch up on the conversations missed while playing by alt-tabbing and scrolling up the chat log to view what people have said.

⁴⁸ While spectate is not a proper use of the word spectator, it is commonly used within the game. Most people refer to this state as “being in spec.”

Servers, by today's standards, are small. The Zone I elected to do my research in is one of the largest, and on general has over 100 players online at any given time. This number fluctuates hugely during peak hours of play. When leagues are going on weekends the active population of players can easily spike upwards of 400-500 players in game. Due to the nature and size of these servers, even the server name will be changed to help protect player identity. Player identity is very important in the Zone. Many players have been playing for over a decade, and their names come with a reputation. Unlike MMOs, the community is small enough that if you play often, a huge portion of the community will know who you are and what you are skilled at. Reputations can last for a long time, and can affect what sort of squad you can get into during leagues. Most of the top teams consist of veteran players and are invite only. Players who have not made a strong reputation for themselves in previous seasons of play are simply not considered to join the squad.

The setting of the narrative is the game itself. The visual design is simplistic by today's standards. It could easily be compared to a multiplayer version of asteroids. The game is two dimensions, despite being set in space. The view the players have is called over-the-top. You can see the top of your ship, which is centred on the screen, and the top of all the other ships around you. The background is a stark black with several layers of stars and other space objects that the ship does not collide with, simply flies over. Then there is the two dimensional space in which the spaceships are placed in. This environment has asteroids, walls, black holes, and debris to contend with. The ships you fly cannot hit each other, if you fly into the same space as another ship you simply go through their avatar. Most of the game is played on teams. Your teammate's names appear yellow on the screen, whereas your enemies appear blue. This is imitated for both chat names and the radar that appears in the top left of the screen and bottom right. Each Zone is compromised of multiple Arenas. An arena is simply a different map that takes up a different portion of space within the game. These areas are not attached and do no associate with each other in any way. The terrain of each map is different, and the tile sets used are completely customizable by the Zone itself. Players move from one arena to another in order to play different styles of the game, events hosted by moderators of the game, and to play in competitive leagues.

Meet People from All Over the World... Then Kill Them. And it's Free!⁴⁹

Mark is in class, but that has never stopped him from doing what he wants. This particular professor allows students to use their computers in class to take notes. Hey, if you're typing how can they tell the difference what you are typing about? On his computer, Mark has his Continuum client open and set to alt-tabbed mode. He can't exactly play during class, but at least he can chat with his friends in game. Mark still takes some notes every once and awhile, but his focus is far too much on the conversations in the game, and not enough on the class. He gets called out; nervous, he closes the game before professor sees.

Several hours later, he gets back to his dorm. While he can use his netbook to chat in the game, it is not ideal for playing. The resolution is too small. He goes over to his main computer turns it on. Mark used to play MMOs but he can no longer justify the monthly costs and got tired of running the same instances over and over again. He played Continuum back in secondary school and decided on a whim to see if any of his old in-game friends still played. That was four months ago, and as it turns out, his old squadron was just remade:⁵⁰ Entropy. Back in the day they were pretty good, even came runner up in the second season of TWDD.⁵¹ He got accepted back into the squad on the condition that he remained an active player and got back to his previous skill level in the game. That was a problem, games like Continuum are like sports, practice makes perfect. While Mark had time to play, he just was not willing to devote the sheer amount of hours to the game like he did back in secondary school. He used to play in a few Zones, but these days he only likes to play in one: Trench Wars. It is the only server his squad cares about anyway. Besides, it had the best settings of any server and one of the most active communities. The settings were his favourite part. Most Zones had settings that made the game slower; it could take 20 bullets or 10 bombs to kill a ship. In Trench Wars, bullets and bombs were more powerful, it only took one to kill.⁵²

Mark's computer finally finishes loading up. He clicks on his Continuum icon on his

⁴⁹ ⁴⁹ This is actually the motto for the game Continuum, but I have elected to use it as the title of my narrative as well. <http://www.getcontinuum.com/> last accessed on 29 September 2011.

⁵⁰ Squadrons (squads for short) are synonymous with guilds from WoW. Joining a squad allows people to play in leagues and socialize with other players. The squadron hierarchy is nowhere near as complex as guilds in WoW. Most squads have one or two leaders, and then have a few assistants that help find league games for TWDD.

⁵¹ TWDD – Trench Wars Dueling Division. Each League has its own name. This league is specifically for 5v5 warbird (wb) duels between squadrons. The Division League uses a robotic referee to organize games, and any squad in the league can play any other at any point in time. Each team has a rating, and when you win or lose a match, your rating goes up or down. Each match consists of three rounds of play to 50. In other words, each player has 10 lives, and the first team to eliminate the other wins.

⁵² Settings vary from zone to zone. Ships have two basic abilities, shooting bullets (by pressing ctrl) and shooting bombs (by pressing tab). Each ship can have a different type of bullet or bomb that deal different amounts of damage. In Trench Wars, bullets and bombs do a lot of damage, and some ships have the ability to kill in one shot. This comes at a price to this ship; the ships in Castle Wars also take a lot more time to recharge their energy to make another shot.

desktop and the game loads up. A small screen appears in the centre of his desktop, from this window he can choose what Zone he wants to play in, what name he wants to play under, and what ship he will start in when the game loads. Mark chooses his usual name, Crossfire and selects to start in spectator mode. The game loads, the loading screen has a ship on it and starts in the background move to make it look as if you are travelling through space and into the game itself. It only takes a second and he's in. Rather than playing the game, Mark immediately alt-tabs out of the game. Oddly, he prefers the alt-tabbed chat interface; it gives him the flexibility to do other things while talking with his friends. He types, "?chat."

The following text immediately appears on screen.

Entropy: A Banana Peel, Thor, Yevol, Napalm, Crossfire

Tobias: A Banana Peel, Crossfire, Rax

1337: Crossfire

Crossfire: A Banana Peel, Thor, Epu, Torain, Glare, Crossfire⁵³

Mark then types, ";1; Hey guys!, ;2; Hello!, ;3; hi!, ;4; What's up?"

1:Crossfire> Hey guys!

2:Crossfire>Hello!

3:Crossfire>Hi!

4:Crossfire> What's up?⁵⁴

Appears on his screen.

1:A Banana Peel> in cwdd2⁵⁵

1:Crossfire> Ah, omw.⁵⁶

⁵³ By typing ?chat Mark has viewed the people who are in his in-game chatrooms. The chats are private in the sense that, only people who know the name of your chat can join it. Mark has decided to use his own avatar name as his own chat. You can see clearly that his first chat is his squads chat. This is only somewhat significant in that it is fastest to chat within the first room because you need only type ";," to input text rather than in subsequent chats having to type the aforementioned ";2; or ;3;" and so on and so forth. Players can only keep 9 private chats at any given time. These chats do not show their names while chatting, only the number that is associated with them.

⁵⁴ I noticed on several occasions that when people log in they introduce themselves on every chat they have, despite many of those chats containing mainly the same people. Interestingly, even though the chats can contain the same people, what they choose to talk about in each chat can be amazingly different, and there were several occasions in which people talked behind the back of other players simply by switching to a chat they were not on.

⁵⁵ This message really means two things. One is the arena that the squad is in which is, "?go TWDD2" and two that they are currently competing in a TWDD match and that squad mates should be there in case someone needs to be substituted out for bad play.

Crossfire heads over to the cwdd2 arena to see how his team is doing. As it turns out, the squad is up against one of the higher ranked squads in the dueling division. The squad, known as Lightning, has a slight lead against Entropy at 15 kills to 12. Crossfire highlights matchbot2's name in his stats bar and types, “/!myfreq” which immediately puts him in spec on his teams frequency.⁵⁷

//A Banana Peel> give coords and deaths please!⁵⁸

//Crossfire> alright! What round?

//Thor> 3

//Crossfire> Team at I11 Center!

//Crossfire> Enemies at G12 Left!⁵⁹

Mark continues to give out coordinates for the team. The game is going quickly: Lightning is an aptly named squad. They are known for their rush tactics in the game and it can lead to some very lob sided and fast games.⁶⁰ Entropy is on the run, and it gives Lightning's rush tactics the upper-hand. A Banana Peel, one of Entropy's best players, manages to navigate his ship through some tough patches of asteroids, and in the process, he takes out three of Lightning's players.

//Crossfire> Keep it up, that put the game at 33-35, only two kills behind guys!⁶¹

⁵⁶ OMW – common abbreviation for “On My Way.”

⁵⁷ The zone uses many custom made bots to control games within the game itself. Matchbots control all of the TWD leagues, and there are many commands that can be sent to them including this one. This particular command allows teammates to help from spectator mode in team chat. Frequency, or Freq as it is called in the game, is a number used to create a team. For example, if your team wanted its own freq, one could type, “=456” and be on the frequency 456. They could then tell their friends to join 456 and they too would type, “=456” and be on the same frequency. In general, people stay on freq 0 and 1 in most arenas.

⁵⁸ There are two significant points about this message. The first is the “//” in front of the message. In order to chat within team chats within Continuum, one most first type two slashes. The message that is received by everyone else does not contain these, but is signified as team chat by being yellow. Rather than make my entire dissertation very colorful, I have opted to just show you the slashes as the signifier for team chat. Additionally, A Banana Peel is specifically asking Crossfire to give the team messages about where to go on the map, specifically coordinates of where fights are taking place. Deaths refer to how many deaths the enemy's currently have. Teams do not tend to start giving out deaths until a player already has seven. At that point teams often target enemies with high deaths to eliminate them from the game and give their team a player advantage.

⁵⁹ These are common macros that players have. Macros are programmable saved messages that can be used within the game. To use a macro, a player simply presses the shift key and F 1-8 and 11-12. The message is automatically sent. The macros Mark is using are based off of this simple message “//%coord %area.” The “//” represents sending the message to the team, and the “%coord” and the “%area” are commands that give automatic based on where your screen is currently viewing. For example: if you were to look at the very top left corner of the viewable arena the message would say, “A1 UpperLeft Corner” in the team chat. The rest of the message is up to the player to decide on, you can make several macros that signify team, enemy, or player.

⁶⁰ Rushing is a specific strategy in the game which consists of thrusting towards the enemy to get in as close proximity as possible and killing them from there. Many players prefer this tactic, rather than shooting from afar and aiming via the radar.

⁶¹ The score is shown on all player's screens within the arena via yet another modification by the staff in the Zone. In the top right corner there is a stat-box that shows the total score for each team, as well as the time remaining. The score counter shows kills rather than deaths so it goes upwards to 50. When a team has killed all 5 players (each having 10

//Crossfire> Team at I10 Center!

//Crossfire> Rax is at 8 deaths, aim for him!

The team aims for Rax, but in the process one of their players, Yevol, is eliminated with 8 kills and 10 deaths. “Yevol is out. 8 wins 10 losses,” appears on everyone’s screen within the arena. This puts Entropy at a major disadvantage. Playing four versus five is a difficult task to overcome, but not impossible. A few more members of Entropy are hit, and they are all around seven to nine deaths, but they are able to strike out Rax before they lose another player. It’s four on four now, the tables are even, but Entropy still are a few kills behind at 41-44. At this point in the game, it’s too late to substitute a player in, Crossfire has not had any time to warm up, and would most likely go three and out, which would hurt his statistics on the webpage; and while the webpage statistics are not the most significant thing to Mark, it can impact whether or not you get played in the more competitive TWL league.⁶² With the deadline for TWL quickly coming up, Mark wanted to make sure he would get at least a little playtime in the more competitive league.

Despite evening the playing field, Entropy couldn’t take the edge in the battle. In the end, they lost 46-50. A close game, but Lightning had two players left at the end, each with two lives. The final score for the three rounds turned out being 40-50, 50-47, and 46-50. All matches are best of three, the third match only being played if the first two are split. Even though it was a loss, taking Lightning to three games with the players online at the time was an impressive feat.

1:Glare> FFS guys, we should have had that one, so close. Yevol man, you have to learn not to die out so fast, we were down a player too early to win it.⁶³

1:Yevol> Dude, they rushed me hard, I was spawn camped for half the game, what do you expect me to do if you guys keep chasing one player around?⁶⁴

1:A Banana Peel> Calm down guys, a good show seeing as Thor is a jav player.⁶⁵

deaths) they win.

⁶² Trench Wars League. The squads that are chosen for this league are based on their scores in the TWD league. While bots are used for TWL games, they have fewer capabilities than the TWD bots, mainly because TWL games require a staff referee to be in attendance to facilitate matches.

⁶³ FFS stands for For Fucks Sake, a very common abbreviation online used in this game during frustrating moments of gameplay. This phrase was one of the few utterances typed during competitive play during observation. Players would type it in frustration after death when there is a 2 second timer on re-spawning.

⁶⁴ Spawning (or respawning) is the term used to describe the process in which a ship reappears after death. The time it takes to respawn is dependent on the arena or zone settings and can be nearly instantaneous or take several seconds. Spawn camping is a strategy in league play of controlling the centre of the map where people spawn. While people spawn randomly across several grids, it is possible to kill people as they spawn as they are not moving and are easier targets. It was one of the common complaints during research, and is generally regarded as a lame or unfair strategy that has no basis in good sportsmanship.

⁶⁵ Jav is a short term for one of the eight ships in the game called Javelin. While TWDD is played only with the

1:Thor> So true, what is this grey ship anyway, why do the bullets come out of the front of it?

1:Napalm> LOL, for as long as you have been playing I'd of thought you could use the wb at least a little bit.

1:Thor> Hey, I just went 10-10 against one of the best wb squads in the game.

1:Napalm> True. Anyone up for another?

1:Thor> I'll TWJD, but I'm not playing another wb again today, I get so angry at them!

1:Glare> Nope, I'm off, time to rage quit.⁶⁶

1:A Banana Peel> Well, that leaves us with three warbirds on, not enough to get a game.

1:Crossfire> I wanted some time to warm up anyway, I hate going straight into leagues, my aiming is always off.

There are two places Crossfire likes to warm-up, in the public arenas, and in the elimination arena.⁶⁷ These two arenas, while drastically different, both provide adequate areas to practice. He heads over to elim and notices that a match is already in progress, which leaves him the choice of playing in the public arena. He switches over and enters (Public 0).⁶⁸ A few messages sent from the Trench Wars Public Bot appear on his screen.

“Welcome to Trench Wars! Kill newbies, earn SpaceBux!

TW-Pub1> Private freqs:[ON] Streak:[ON] Store:[ON] Kill-o-thon:[OFF] Duel:[ON]
 Hunt:[OFF]

TW-Pub1> ROUND 2 Stats: Freq 1 holding for 2:04, needs 0:56 more. [Time: 12:29] Score: 0 –

Warbird ship, TWJD is played only with the Javelin. The two styles of game-play are very different. Warbirds can only shoot bullets that kill in one shot. Javelins can shoot bombs that bounce once off of walls or debris, and explode on impact on players or the 2nd impact. The TWDD arena is spread out and wide, really only containing asteroids as the main source of obstacle. TWJD on the other hand is fought within a castle-like structure that confines the players and makes for a different style of game-play that many members of the community are only experts of one in. TWBD is played within a similar castle to that of TWJD, but the gameplay itself is different and allows for use of all ships.

⁶⁶ Rage quitting is leaving the game in anger, usually after a loss or something that has frustrated the player has occurred.

⁶⁷ Elimination (Elim) is the “?go elim” (currently ?go elimbeta) arena. This arena is a free for all style elimination. Every player has 10 deaths and can kill any other player, the last surviving player wins, but overall kill versus death ratio statistics are more important to the player base than overall wins. There is a complex ranking system that is involved in ranking the players automatically based on their play in the elim arena. It was apparently very competitive at one point, but now is seen more as a place to warm up and practice ships.

⁶⁸ There are actually multiple public arenas because there is a limit to how many people can play on each team within the public arenas (in order to allow for better game balance). To switch to any public arena (as it doesn't really matter which one you would be going to if you were just warming up) a player simply types, “?go” and the game will take you to the next available public arena with space.

1⁶⁹

Back in the day, Mark hated playing in the public arena. It was considered a place for newbs and basers only. These days the perception of the public arena has changed. Trench Wars staff made new incentives to play in public. There's a cash system in which playing gives you points that you can use on bonuses. One of the best ways to get cash is to bet on duels. Duels are one-versus-one matches that take place in little enclosed circles on the outside of the map. When you duel, the players are warped into this small space, and fight for the given amount of deaths until one person is victorious. Mark loves to duel, but right now feels like playing the base.

The public arena finishes loading. Mark presses his alt key to bring up the full size map of the arena. He notices they've made some slight changes to the map, but the general design is pretty much the same. The staff of Trench Wars likes to modify the map, and even occasionally make fully thematic maps for holidays such as Halloween and Christmas. This map is normal though. Its basic design is circular. The outer circle is a giant asteroid belt, completely inescapable by the players. All fighting goes on within this circle in other words. In the upper portions of the circle is a giant castle. This castle has one main entrance, but there are several smaller are more difficult ones to navigate. It seems odd to have castle in the middle of space, but no one questions it. This castle is where the real battle is; because the game is 2-dimensional, the castle has several narrow corridors for the ships to pass through. These trench-like areas are where the name of the zone comes from. Once inside the castle there is a main section similar to that of an outer bailey of a traditional castle. There is then a second gate, or trench, that has to be passed through to gain access to the keep and inner bailey as it were. In here is the flag. The actual game is rather a simple play on a traditional capture the flag game. The flag does not move, rather the goal is for each team to hold the keep and the flag within it. Battles are held at the major choke points on the map, which happen to be the trenches. Mark leaves the spectator mode and enters the game in ship number one.⁷⁰ The Warbird. As he wants to warm up to play in TWDD, it is apt that he practices in the ship that the league is based on.

//Ungarmax> attach to me for the flagroom!

⁶⁹ The first sentence in this quotation is an arena message that is seen as green by all players as they enter the game. The second two messages are private messages sent from the pub-bot. The first message explains what the current public settings are, and the second shows the progress of the current game. The settings in a pub are changeable only by a member of staff, and players can request that certain settings be turned on or off. Some settings are advertised as weekend events, and change the game-play within the arena for the entire weekend. One of the more common settings is banning the 4th ship in the game, the leviathan, which is a very power, very slow ship that greatly changes the game strategy.

⁷⁰ To enter the game as a ship from spectator mode, players have to first hit the "esc" key then the number associated with the ship. The warbird happens to be ship number 1, so to enter the game as a warbird you need only type, "esc-1."

//Ungarmax> attach to me for the flagroom!⁷¹

//Wired> enemy terr has a portal in the flagroom careful, don't push outside of flagroom!⁷²

Crossfire ignores the call for help by his fellow teammate. His concern isn't keeping the flag as the base has little in common with TWDD league play. Instead, Crossfire stays outside of the base and picks off players heading to it. He presses shift to use his thrusters. This allows his ship to move very quickly, but uses his energy. In order to time it just right, Crossfire has to stop thrusting at just the right moment so he also has enough energy to shoot immediately after. By doing this, he can get in close to other players and rush them before they can turn their ship and shoot at him. It takes a few tries, and he dies many times in the process, but eventually he starts hitting his targets.

“Freq 0 will win in 60 seconds.”⁷³

While this is great practice for Crossfire, it is terrible for his team to be down a man in the battle for the base. Freq 1 falls behind and loses the round.

//Ungarmax> ugh, if people would just attach and fight for the flag we could have won that!

Despite the protests of his freq, Crossfire continues to play outside of the base for some time until a message appears on his screen that makes him leave the arena.

“Next elim is starting. Type ?go elimbeta to play -Robo Ref”⁷⁴

Crossfire decided that it might be a good time to switch arenas and went to elim. When he got there it the game was still in the voting process.

⁷¹ Another common macro used within public arenas. This player is using a the 5th ship in the game known as a terrier. In trench wars, it is the only ship that other players can attach to. Attaching your ship to another is a somewhat interesting concept. In the game it results in your ship avatar becoming a turret on the other player's ship. You still have the same energy and abilities you always have, only you do not control flight. If the ship is hit you still take damage. For Trench Wars, this ship holds the important purpose of allowing players to bypass the defences of the map, allowing teams to hold the flagroom (the keep) for long periods of time. If your team's terrier dies, the entire team has to once again gain access to the castle via the trenches. In league play, only one terrier is allowed per team, in public arenas like this one, there can be more.

⁷² This is a common warning by players both in the public arena and in basing league play. The terrier (ship 5), has an extra ability no other ship has in Trench Wars. This ability allows the player to lay down a portal. The player can then port to that portal at any time of his choosing, warping the player and anyone attached to them across the screen. This can bypass defenses, and in battles for the flagroom, might catch the other team off guard and allow the team to take the flag.

⁷³ An arena message is sent by the bot in the arena during crucial moments of game-play. This one warns players that Freq 0 will win in the next 60 seconds unless another freq (Freq 1) takes the flag from them.

⁷⁴ During my research in TW, elim was always in a state of beta. Normal ?go elim was not playable, and everyone used ?go elimbeta exactly as if it were elim. It was a way for the staff to differentiate between a bot that was still in development and testing, and the previous bot used for elim which was well tested and had few glitches. Robo Ref, to my knowledge, is the oldest bot in TW. This iteration of the program is new, but the name stems from the original elim, which by all accounts was the first robotically refereed game in the zone.

“VOTE: 1-Warbird, 2-Javelin, 3-Spider, 4-Leviathen, 5-Terrier, 6-Weasel, 7-Lancaster, 8-Shark”⁷⁵

Crossfire> 1

Rax> 1

Thor> 2

Kaju> 2

Oren> 1

“This will be Warbird elim. VOTE: How many deaths? (1-10)”⁷⁶

Crossfire> 5

Rax> 1

Thor> 10

Kaju> 10

Oren> 10

After the votes, the bot in the arena begins to prepare the arena for the elimination. During this time, Crossfire warms up, shooting and killing other ships during the period in which the arena is not locked. He quickly alt-tabs out of the game and starts up a music playlist. The game is intense, and Crossfire has always found that music helps his focus in the game and keeps him a little more calm. No one uses voice-chat for the game, even in leagues, so he can get away with it unlike in other games he’s played online.

“Warbird elim to 10.”

“Enter to play. Arena will be locked in 15 seconds!”⁷⁷

Kaju> you guys should spec now, before I embarrass you and your crappy wb play

“RULES: One player per freq and NO TEAMING! Die 5 times and you're out.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Each time an elim starts, the players get to vote on which type of elim it is going to be. By far and away, the most popular elims are the Warbird and Javelin elims. In this case the players have picked warbird.

⁷⁶ After voting on the type of elim, players can select how many deaths each player is allotted. The most popular matches being 10,5,3, or 1 death. For both voting systems, players put their vote in public chat, viewable by all. The bot in the arena calculates the vote and proceeds to setup the game.

⁷⁷ Bots and Moderators have the ability to “lock” arenas. What this does is prevent players in spec from entering the playable game within an arena. This is vital for leagues and events such as elim, as players entering could affect the game in process.

Oren> pfft, goodluck man

“Get ready. Game will start in 10 seconds!”

“GO GO GO!!!”⁷⁹

The match starts, and immediately Crossfire manages to get a kill. The 10 second warning gives a good indicator of when the game will start, and he often tries to time his first shot to coincide exactly with the start of the game, giving him a quick kill to be ahead on his kill death ratio. He fires, and misses. This puts him at a disadvantage. After the shot his energy is low and he cannot use his thrusters to escape an incoming rush and he dies. Zero kills to one death, not a great start for Mark. He tries to keep calm, remembering that sometimes when he plays from behind he is too risky and ends up getting in more trouble rather than coming back. He respawns, no one is on his radar so he’s safe from being spawn killed. Mark uses his thrusters and navigates around the asteroids around him, giving them little attention. His focus now is on his radar. It is vital to know when a ship is nearby before they are even in visual range. His expertise in the game is shooting ships down before they are even in visual range. It takes a lot of practice, and a bit of luck, but Mark can get well ahead in his kill to death ratio by using this strategy. This strategy can fail when there are a few expert rushers on, or when elim is particularly busy and the map is packed with a lot of players; tonight however, elim is relatively sparse and only has six players other than him playing.

He manages to get three kills without ever letting a ship appear on his visual screen. Soon after though he takes a shot that misses and the player on the radar quickly dives in and gets close. It’s Rax, one of the players from Lightning that his squad played earlier. Rax is famous for his rushing ability and is one of the best elim players in the game. His reputation in TW is highly regarded, and he has been on four previous TWLD champion teams, including his current squad Lightning. Crossfire tries to run, and manages to get away for a brief moment, before Rax makes a second surge and catches him, blowing up his shit.

Rax> sit runner⁸⁰

⁷⁸ As all eliminations are every man for himself; teaming is not tolerated within the events. Even though players are not on the same team, they often will not target friends, giving them the upper-hand in the game. This is not legal, and players caught doing this are forced into spec before the game ends by the moderators of TW.

⁷⁹ This “GO GO GO” always has a sound-bit that plays with it. It comes from the general game noises built into the installed game. The sound-bit is oddly someone saying “GOAL GOAL GOAL,” but the it is said in a way that could be easily confused with “GO” and so the zone went with it for that purpose.

⁸⁰ Two common terms used within the game. Sit is usually used as a taunt after killing someone, an attempt to get a rise out of other people playing the game. Crossfire’s style of playing the game from long range is often looked down on and seen as ‘running’ because they are constantly trying to remain on the radar of opponents.

Crossfire> whatever laggot⁸¹

Rax> PING Current:80 ms Average:70 ms Low:50 ms High:200ms S2C: 0.0% C2S: 0.2%⁸²

With his record now being 3-2, Crossfire ignores the chat that is going on in the arena and focuses on trying to get some more kills before other players are eliminated. He usually lasts until one of the final two or three players, but by his opposition tends to be better, and his chances to get kills decrease significantly. To keep his rating in elim, he ideally aims to get more than 12 kills per round so long as the game is to 10 deaths. He'll happily settle for an even kill to death game of 10 wins to 10 losses. Flying around the rectangular arena he manages to destroy several more ships, leaving him with a strong game of 8 kills and 2 deaths.⁸³ By this point in the game, three of the six players in his opposition remain. Rax is one of the players left, and his record is far more impressive than Crossfire's at 16 kills to 6 deaths. Rax quickly kills off the other surviving opponent who was already at 9 deaths. This leaves just Rax and Crossfire left in the game, and while it may seem as though all those extra lives Crossfire has from being cautious would give him a huge advantage, Rax's skill level at rushing and playing one versus one give him a considerable advantage over him.

Rax> Time for you to go 8-10 newb.

Crossfire> stfu⁸⁴

Crossfire> next kill wins?⁸⁵

Rax> you'd like that wouldn't you. NO

⁸¹ Lag is a constant problem in both Continuum and WoW. In Continuum in particular it is a point of major discussion. Visually, players can directly hit a ship on their screen, but on the other players screen they actually dodge the attack. This often causes major outrage, and in leagues there are strict lag rules that prevent people with higher latency from playing the game. Laggot is a slang term used to insult people who are perceived to be taking advantage of their lag.

⁸² Rax has shown that his latency is actually very low in the game, to combat the claims that Crossfire has made about him being a lagger. This type of banter is surprisingly common during elim, but during league matches most of the banter is saved until after the match. During matches teams usually call for "blueout." This term means the removal of public chat within the arena of the game, preventing general taunts and complaints that are disruptive to game-play. While this does not prevent sending messages to the opposing team or players, it effectively stops the majority of conversation that would otherwise be had within the arena.

⁸³ Wins and losses, kills and deaths, are completely interchangeable terms to refer to a player's record within the game. While it appears more common for players to refer to it as kills and deaths, the bots always refer to it as wins and losses. However on the online stats page, the wins and losses are once again referred to as kills and deaths, to avoid confusion with actually winning the event itself. <http://www.trenchwars.org/index.php?v=elim&x=1&s=1&f=1&o=0> (last viewed on 11/09/2011)

⁸⁴ STFU – a common abbreviation used within online communities, meaning "Shut the fuck up." These types of language are often used during banter, and while it may seem harsh and cruel when spoken aloud, does not generally convey anything more than small banter within this particular game.

⁸⁵ Often, when two players have a substantial amount of lives left in elim, and there are many players waiting in spec, the two players decide to only play to one more death. If a player gets shot, it is then expected for them to go into spec and concede the game, rather than play out the rest of a duel that could take several minutes or more. While these are agreed on, not all players are as honourable as others, and the agreement is not always upheld.

Rax and Crossfire go way back, and their drastically different styles of playing the game have often put them at odds with each other. Oddly, when not playing against each other they get along fine, but especially in elim, they both have a reputation of trying to rile up other players and get inside their head to gain an upper-hand against opponents. These conversations can end up going either way depending on how competitive they are being on a particular day. Sometimes, it leads to funny banter, with the two of them jokingly insulting each other; other times, they are at each other's throats with rage over how the other plays. This time, Crossfire decides not to be riled up about how the conversation has gone. He hits "esc-F5" to turn off his chat. All his focus is now devoted to winning this elimination duel.

Rax quickly kills Crossfire twice, doubling his death count, but Rax's rushing style can be risky. Soon after, Rax misses a vital close range shot, leaving him defenceless and giving Crossfire an easy kill. Mark is actually nervous now; his hands are slightly shaking from the adrenaline, his heart pumping. He takes a deep breath and puts his hands on the ready position. Right hand set on the arrow keys, his left thumb on ctrl, and his left index finger on shift.⁸⁶ Rax is at 18 kills and 7 deaths. He just has to kill him three more times to win this. Rax dives around several asteroids and Crossfire takes his shot. He misses. Rax is on him, he can't manage to dodge the incoming attack and Rax kills him again. He is at 9 kills and 5 deaths now, he can feel his opportunity to win dwindling. Crossfire respawns, and Rax was lucky and right next to where he spawned. Rax kills him before he can even move. Angered by the cheap spawn kill, Mark loses his cool and in his anger plays poorly, and is quickly killed two more times. His score is now 9 kills and 8 deaths, and his control of the pace of the game is gone.

He respawns again, this time Rax is not on his screen or radar, and he might be able to keep to the range he wants. Rax quickly comes into radar view and he shoots. Rax is moving too fast and didn't expect such a quick shot. He flies directly into it. The game is a dead heat. Rax respawns right next to Crossfire, and this time Crossfire has the upperhand and kills Rax before he can move. Mark usually avoids spawn killing, he thinks it is lame, but because Rax already did it to him once this round he has no qualms getting his revenge. Rax, having only one life left starts to play more conservatively. His aggressive style of play is highly effective when he has a lot of lives to spare, but with only one he cannot take the risk of giving Crossfire an easy final kill. Unfortunately, this plays well into Crossfire's style of playing. Keeping to long-range the final battle takes several minutes, each player missing a multitude of shots. Eventually, Rax catches a

⁸⁶ The basic controls of the game make it so the left hand is usually situated so that a player can have his thumb on ctrl (which fires bullets), index finger on shift (which is the main thrusters for extra speed), and the middle finger on tab (which shoots bombs). This is still a surprisingly intuitive and fairly economic game setup that is comfortable to play for long periods of time.

bullet shot by Crossfire and loses the round!

“Rax is out. 22 wins 10 losses”

“Game over. Winner: Crossfire!”

“MVP: Rax”⁸⁷

Rax> at least I still myped it, gg⁸⁸

Crossfire> yeah gg, I got lucky

Rax> you bet you did, I slaughtered you, your running tactics just give you too many lives

Crossfire takes a deep breath; he’s still amazingly stressed by this fight. Even though he tries not to put much weight into winning elim, he always gets caught up in the moment. Duels are intense, and there is a lot of pride felt after such a victory. Even though he won with far fewer kills, he feels that the victory validates his style of game-play. Feeling properly warmed up, he checks and sees who is online within the squad again. As it turns out, a lot of people have silently logged on, but not many of them are DD players.⁸⁹

1:Crossfire> whew, just beat Rax 1v1 in a wb elim, it was intense

1:A Banana Peel> yeah, I was watching you, you got so lucky man

1:Crossfire> whatever, a win is a win, I’ll take what I can get

1:Crossfire> TWDD count⁹⁰

1:A Banana Peel> 2

1:Thor> I feel like basing, we have enough on for once, let’s TWBD instead.

1:Thor> BD count

1:Crossfire> 2

1:A Banana Peel> 3

⁸⁷ MVP – Most Valued Player is given to the person who had the most kills during the event.

⁸⁸ GG – Good Game. A common abbreviation across many online games. Within TW, it is usually said at the end of a match, but can also be used as a taunt during game-play immediately after killing someone.

⁸⁹ This is short term slang for types of league play. DD is short for the already abbreviated TWDD, JD for TWJD, and BD for TWBD.

⁹⁰ When players want to try and find a league game, they do so by saying something along the lines of this. After the announcement, people will post if they are up for a game or not. If there are enough players interested the captain or assistants will look for another squad willing to play. Challenges are sent out to squads via the league bots, which are in each individual league arena.

1:Epu> 4

1:Glare> 4

1:Napalm> 6

1:Yevol> 7

1:A Banana Peel> alright 7 is enough, I'll start sending out challenges.

Although Crossfire prefers playing in DDs, he's always been a fan of basing as well. With a larger number of players and ships, the strategies involved in winning basing matches contain more variety and complexity than in the other leagues. Crossfire's squad, Entropy, has always been in the middle of the pack when it comes to basing. Their main focus has always been winning TWDD and TWJD, but in order to attract some of the better players for those leagues, squads have to offer some competition in TWBD as well.

A Banana Peel is one of Entropy's assistants that are given the ability to find and accept challenges from other squads in the game. For the longest time, Crossfire could not figure out why someone would choose the name A Banana Peel as a name to play a game with, so one day he asked. As it turns out, the reason he chose the name is because of how kills are shown in the game itself. When someone is killed in the arena a message pops up in the centre of everyone's screen. So when A Banana Peel kills someone, the message appears as such, "Crossfire killed by: A Banana Peel," making it sound as if Crossfire, in the middle of space, managed to slip on some random banana peel! Hilarious.

While A Banana Peel is looking for matches, Crossfire starts chatting with him over private messages, discussing many things but particularly the current state of the game.

A Banana Peel> Yeah, I just don't think I'll be playing the game much longer, I have so much class work to finish and I have a few other online games that just seem to be taking priority over this one. I mean, I get on to play a few matches every day, but I don't really have time to help manage this squad anymore.

Crossfire> I can understand that, I quit the game for a long time and only came back because I have a little more free time now that I am at University and can't afford to play a game like WoW.

A Banana Peel> We've lost a lot of players to the new MMOs, remember Qwerty? He had been playing since 1997 and quit two years ago to play WoW with some friends of his, haven't seen him since.

Crossfire> Man, he was good too. How many titles did he have again?

A Banana Peel> I'm not sure, Rotary won three consecutive titles though and I know he captained them.

Crossfire> Yeah, he probably has a few more titles on top of that; it's a shame we keep losing players like that.

A Banana Peel> Hey, you stopped playing a few years as well, don't forget.

Crossfire> Yeah, and I probably will again. It's a lot of fun and it's great seeing some of the old players, but it's not the same now that so many people have left.

A Banana Peel> There are still a few real die-hard players out there, TW will survive so long as it finds some new players just as interested.

Crossfire> Hah, good luck with that.

Eventually, A Banana Peel finds a game. It's against Pressure, a relatively new squad, but their specialty is basing. They've played each-other many times, as they are two of the more active squads and it has been a very even rivalry over this TWD season.

Matchbot 4> A game will start against Entropy and Pressure in 5 minutes in ?go twbd.⁹¹

1:Thor> Alright! Let's win this one. Dibs spider, I hate being shark.

The teams go to the basing arena where their match is to be played. The squad discusses who is going to play what. Crossfire really only has experience in base as two ships: the Spider and the Shark. The two ships have drastically different roles, and they are both vital parts of the team's success. The squad doesn't have many sharks on right now so it is decided Crossfire will take over the role of shark for this match. He tells them he has to log off and change his keyboard settings before the game. He exits the game, and opens up the keyboard layout menu in the games options. Fortunately, the game allows you to save multiple settings and he just clicks on the one he labelled, "shark." This keyboard setting is essential for playing shark in leagues.

The shark is a strange ship in TW. It cannot shoot bullets, and it shoots an insanely slow bomb that at first glance doesn't appear to be much use. Its real function in the base is its ability to repel enemy attacks away from its team, and its ability to lay down space mines that blockade the

⁹¹ The bots message both squads who are about to play the match, notifying them that their challenge has been accepted. It also informs them which arena they are to go to, as well as how much time they have to add their players before the game starts. Teams can start the game before the timer expires, if both teams prompt the bot that their squads are ready, it will begin earlier.

trenches within the base. This ability is why Crossfire needs to change his keyboard settings to play in the league. To repel with the normal settings he would have to press the “shift” and the “ctrl” key at the same time. While this is not difficult, if you press shift slightly early, you can waste energy thrusting and make it so you do not have enough energy to lay mines or delay the essential timing of a repel burst. Crossfire switches this essential ability to just the “ctrl” button because sharks in TW have no bullets. He logs back into the game, and immediately types, “?go twbd” to re-enter the arena they will be playing in.

1:Crossfire> Back.

1:Thor> Finally a match where I get to spid instead of shark! Thanks cross.

1:A Banana Peel> We’ve lost four straight to these guys, let’s not let these newbs beat us again, our basers will kill us if our rating gets even lower.

Once the team is all in the arena, A Banana Peel starts to add the players into the game by typing to the matchbot, “!/addplayer Crossfire:8.”

“Crossfire has been added in ship 8,” appears on everyone’s screen in the arena.

The team has a discussion about who will be playing what ship, and what their general strategy this game should be. They decide on playing only sharks to start, and if they have difficulty holding the flagroom, they’ll swap Epu to Jav to try and break Pressure’s cram.⁹² A Banana Peel is Entropy’s best terr, and will be their team leader during the match. Napalm is the other shark playing beside Crossfire, and everyone else on the team starts out as a spider.

//A Banana Peel> Alright, everyone ready?

//Crossfire>

//Thor>

//Yevol>

//Napalm>

//Epu>

⁹² Cram or Cramming is a basing strategy used during gameplay to block the small trench entering the flagroom of the base. An entire team puts all of its ships in that one tiny location making it very difficult for the opposing team to withstand the high rate of fire coming at such a specific spot on the map.

//Glare>⁹³

A Banana Peel types, “/matchbot !ready” and the bot notifies the arena that Entropy is ready to play the game. Both teams have to ready for the match to start before the 5 minute timer expires. If a team decides to wait, the game will start at the end of that timer so long as both teams have the required amount of people in the game. Pressure also had their line-up for the match in, and also decided to ready before the timer expired and the game started. They too, also decided to go with all spiders, two sharks, and their terrier as the initial lineup.

Both teams are ready. First team to hold the flag for 15 minutes wins! -Matchbot

Immediately both teams were warped to their safe zones.⁹⁴ The game will not actually start until another 30 second countdown commences.

//A Banana Peel> Crossfire takes the first set of repels once we warp, Napalm the second got it?

//Crossfire> Got it

//Napalm> No prob

//A Banana Peel> everyone make sure they have my name highlighted so they can warp quickly after their first death!⁹⁵

Blueout has been enabled. -Matchbot

At ten seconds a visual queue appears on everyone’s screen indicating the game is about to start. A visual countdown then begins at 5 seconds, each number appearing on the screen in sequenced immediately at the centre. “5, 4, 3, 2, 1 GO GO GO GO!”

All of the players are immediately warped to the flagroom of the base and the battle begins! Each team is warped to either side of the flagroom in a section known as “the ear” of the base, that give slight protection to each team before the battle begins. Crossfire thrusts out of the ear as quickly as possible towards the centre of the flagroom where the flag is located. He waits for the

⁹³ It is common for players to respond to ready calls with no actual text. The game allows players to enter a message that contains no information other than the name of the player. This is usually used during ready calls for matches.

⁹⁴ Safe Zones in the game are designated patches in which players take no damage. For matches, these safe zones are designed to prevent either team from gaining an advantage before the game starts. Warping is an ability that both bots have and moderators have within the game. This ability allows players to be moved immediately to specific locations of the map, and is particularly useful for controlling when matches start during league play.

⁹⁵ In order to teleport to a terrier in the game, players must highlight the terriers name in their top left statistics-box and then hit the “F7” key.

enemy fire to commence, and when the bullets get close to him he hits his ctrl button and repels the bullets away from himself and the team. He does this three times and then immediately rushes towards the opposing team and tries to be killed as quickly as possible. Oddly, the shark's role is mainly team defence, and the best way to go about it is to use the ship's ability to repel well, and then die quickly so that you may respawn and warp back with another three repels available for your disposal. Pressure avoids Crossfire however and it takes longer than it normally should for him to be killed.

By the time he has died, Napalm has also used two of his repels to protect the team. Since it takes several seconds to respawn and then warp to the terrier, this means his team will most likely be unprotected from the enemy fire for a short while between his death and Napalm's. During this brief period of being unable to play, the game defaults back to the centre of the map, well away from where the action is going. Crossfire does not know how the battle is going until he respawns and warps back to the terrier.

A Banana Peel is in trouble, that little bit of time between the two sharks protecting the team has decimated their control of the flagroom and the terrier is stuck in a corner with most of Pressure's spiders lobbing bullet after bullet directly at the terr. Crossfire's warp was just in time to deflect what would have surely otherwise have been the first terrier kill of the match.⁹⁶ The rest of the team soon warps back into the flagroom again and they begin a push on Pressure's defences. This battle goes better than the first, and the two sharks' timing improves, allowing safe protection for their team. They quickly take out both of Pressure's sharks and kill the entire team, including Pressure's terrier NL>Warpig.⁹⁷

A Banana Peel> PUSH OUT!

A Banana Peel> Need greens, I don't have a portal!⁹⁸

The team flies out of the flagroom into the lower portion of the base. Crossfire and Napalm

⁹⁶ General strategy for basing games is to kill the opposing team's terrier, thus preventing easy access to the base. It is such a significant part of the game that it is one of the main statistics for points given to individual players during matches.

⁹⁷ Some players add titles in front of their name. Titles like NL> before name often indicate where that player is from. Continuum has a diverse global gaming population, and this particular player is from the Netherlands, and has decided to indicate with his name where he is from to other players.

⁹⁸ This phrase is a common player macro for basing. Greens are little boxes that appear on the screen that appear after someone has been killed. When flown over, these boxes can contain rewards for particular ships that could be helpful, like portals or repels. Since the terrier can only have one portal, it is vital that the terrier get greens to collect more so that they can move safely in the flagroom.

go into the larger lower trench and begin to lay mines to make entry difficult for Pressure. Crossfire only lays mines in this section of the base as his mines can be just as dangerous to his team as the enemies. A repelled mine can hit a wall and the area damage can kill your own teammates. Opposing teams know this, and enemy sharks often try to aim their repels so that your mines kill your team.

Pressure's team arrives into the trench and the sharks move forward first, removing Crossfire and Napalm's mines and giving clearance for the rest of the team to get into the body of the base. Knowing their first line of defence is broken, Entropy doubles back to the flagroom and rebuilds their defence there! A Banana Peel uses his portal that he placed within the flagroom to instantly move to safety.

//A Banana Peel> Even the cram!!⁹⁹

//A Banana Peel> Need greens, I don't have a portal!

Crossfire and Napalm time their lives so that one of them is always alive, ready with their three repels to defend the entryway. Entropy maintains their defensive position and the flagroom for five entire minutes without Pressure getting into the flagroom. Then suddenly, Pressure makes a change to their lineup.

Fadden has been swapped from ship 3 to ship 2. –Matchbot

//Napalm> They swapped a jav in, watch out for jav bombs!

Javelins are powerful ships in the hands of the right players, and the impact of the ship change is almost immediate. Fadden takes a shot that bounces once in the trench, and Crossfire repels it on his screen, but lag makes it hit on everyone else's screen and the server. Most of the team is wiped out in a single shot.¹⁰⁰ Pressure flies into the flagroom and takes it, then quickly move out to start their defensive fight for the base.

//Crossfire> I repped that on my screen, lag bomb!

//A Banana Peel> sigh

⁹⁹ Cramming the trench into the flagroom entails putting spiders on either side of the entry way and letting them shoot down at the enemy. Their positioning is easier to maintain than the attackers who are forced to be constantly moving. Sharks repel the enemy team out of the trench making it very difficult to enter.

¹⁰⁰ This is a prime example of how latency can have major repercussions to the players. Crossfire thought he successfully stopped an attack from the enemy team, but the server and his team perceived him missing the timing of the repel and they died because of it. What is real on your screen is not necessarily the case for others.

//A Banana Peel> Attach for base attack!

Entropy is now on the attack. As they rush towards the base, they see Pressure is using the same strategy Entropy used within the first trench. Crossfire and Napalm clear the trench of mines, but in the process A Banana Peel dies, giving Pressure precious time with the flag. A Banana Peel rushes towards the base again, this time they clear through the entry trench and get into the main base. Pressure retreats to the flagroom and begin their cram defence. What was an advantage on offense for Pressure, is a hindrance on defence. The jav bombs have the risk of being repelled into their defence, and without the extra spider, the cram itself feels as though they are one player short. Entropy takes advantage of Pressure's disorganization in the cram and breaks into the flagroom with a strong push. They only get into the room for a brief moment before the team is largely wiped out. A Banana Peel manages to escape back out the trench and into the main section of the base before he is killed.

//A Banana Peel> I have a portal in the flagroom, everyone attach and I'll warp in, try and lure them out now!

Pressure pushes out of the flagroom without realising that A Banana Peel has a portal inside. The team attaches to him and they warp directly into the flagroom! Now with both teams inside the flagroom a long battle commences for the flag, each side taking it for several minutes at a time. The game is close, but Entropy holds a slight time advantage over Pressure, having the flag for 9 minutes 36 seconds to Pressure's 8 minutes 54 seconds. It's a tough battle, but eventually Entropy takes over the flagroom by taking out Pressure's terrier.

//A Banana Peel> Clear the flagroom!

The team tries to take out the remaining players left in the flagroom as quickly as possible, but by the time they have it cleared and under control, Pressure's terrier is already in the main section of the base. Entropy has only the cram position left for defence. With only 5 minutes left for a win, the intensity of playing is high. Crossfire is nervous of messing up again, and is carefully watching Pressure's javelin to make sure no bombs kill the team. Unfortunately, Crossfire is only half of the shark defence team, and this time it is Napalm that makes the mistake.

Napalm accidentally lays a mine right in the entranceway of the flagroom! A Banana Peel, worried that this bomb would be repelled directly into him flies out of the cram and into one of the ears of the flagroom. The squad Pressure is allowed to enter the flagroom almost entirely unimpeded because of this error.

//A Banana Peel> wtf napalm...

//Napalm> SORRY

It could have been worse, but A Banana Peel's fast reactions to the game saved them the total loss of the flagroom. Once again, the team of all spiders shows its advantage within the flagroom by keeping the constant barrage of bullets aimed directly at the opposition. Eventually they clear the flagroom again. By this point there are only two minutes remaining before their victory.

//A Banana Peel> PUSH OUT!

The team rushes out into the main section of the base once more. Crossfire and Napalm lay mines in the first trench. This time, Pressure's terrier hits a mine in his haste to try and regain the flag. With such little time left in the match, Pressure has to take higher risks to get the flag back. Unfortunately, these strategies often backfire and waste precious time. With the second death, Napalm and Crossfire push their defences further out and the team moves to the outer walls of the base. With only a minute remaining, Entropy manages to keep Pressure out of the base entirely and win the game!

//A Banana Peel> great job guys!

//Napalm> gg

//Crossfire> gg

A Banana Peel> gg Pressure

NL>Warpig> whatever, you laggots got lucky

Napalm> lol, right after your jav lag bombs us you call us lucky AND laggy?

NL>Warpig> whatever man, gg we'll own you next game

Napalm> right, just sit son¹⁰¹

Mark hears his phone buzz. It is a text from a friend at Uni, asking if he wants to go out drinking later tonight. Mark looks at his computer, and thinks, about it. Great timing, the match just finished he can just leave now without anyone complaining. Mark would never dream of leaving a match mid game, most things can wait the 30 or so minutes it takes to play. That being

¹⁰¹ This sort of banter after games have been played is common. The matches tend to be intense and people do get worked up over what has happened in the game after the match has occurred. The main reason blueout is used in leagues is because of the amount of verbal conflict that use to occur between two teams while a game was in play.

said, he has no qualms leaving while the rest of the team wants another match. His real life friends take priority, even though he has known some of the guys in the game for far longer.

1:Crossfire> Alright guys, I'm out. Time to get my drink on.

Mark doesn't exit the game, he simply alt-tabs out and leaves it running. He doesn't want to miss out on any conversations that might happen while he's gone. He simply switches to a private arena and leaves.

Analysis of the Continuum Narrative

Unlike WoW, where finding people to discuss the community and teach you how to play the game was relatively easy, in Continuum it was difficult. Trench Wars has an aging community with players who have been involved with it for over a decade. Gaining access to this player base, especially within the context of league-play is very difficult. Despite the simplicity of the game, there is a steep learning curve to mastering the mechanics, and because of this, and my general lack of skill in the game, I had much more difficulty gaining access to the higher echelon squads within the game. The perspective I saw most was that of squads on the brink of making it to the more elite TWL leagues, but were not competitive enough to be real contenders in those leagues.

Despite my lack of skill, there were plenty of social circles in which I was freely available to observe in an unobtrusive way, as well as several chats that were freely given by players to promote larger discussions within the chat itself; the level of player's skill within these chats varied greatly, and the only real discerning factor of who talked in what conversations was how long a person has been playing. One of the most common discussion topics within these chats was about players who played the game in the past, or how rules have changed from a few years ago. There is no doubt in the players' mind of Continuum, that the game is slowly losing its player base. Despite it being free and making strong efforts to promote a new player base, there is a feeling and consensus by the players that older members are slowly leaving the game for greener pastures. Either they have finally been attracted to a newer game with better graphics, or they have grown to an age in which their jobs and real life social obligations have reached a point to which they player does not have the time to play the game at all.

Trench Wars, in an attempt to attract new competitive players, has initiated several cash award events in which people playing the game have the opportunity to win cash rewards for their efforts. While the rewards may not be huge (upwards of around \$50 USD) it is significant enough to be a nice reward for doing something most players already enjoy doing. Unfortunately, these events are most likely won by the old veteran players who are still around. So while it may attract players to the events, new players have such a low chance of winning that very few will be continuously tempted by the rewards. In addition to this, the Trench Wars community is actively trying to gain more attention to their game. As they are aware of their declining numbers, there are frequent forum posts on their webpage regarding what can be done to both keep people playing, and attract new players.¹⁰² There is hope that with these new attempts the player base will increase and

¹⁰² <http://forums.trenchwars.net/showthread.php?41994-TW-Advertising> last viewed on September 29, 2011, this forum post is more recent example of the dialogue that goes on between the staff of the zone and the player base in attempts to bring more traffic to their webpage, thus increasing their player base.

the game will once again thrive, but given the general demeanour of the people still playing, it feels unlikely. Conversations such as the one A Banana Peel and Crossfire have within the narrative are common in the public chats and spectator chats within the game. Players often reminisce about the earlier days of the game when it was still in its “golden age.”

That being said, it is still apparent that the people who currently play the game, especially those who play in leagues, are very competitive. Player’s gain reputation with the league communities by being successful in league play, and many players main concern is their advancement to better squads with an increased chance of winning TWD and TWL titles for the prospective style of game-play. Squads, unlike guilds in WoW, seem to come and go at faster rates. Players will try their hand at leading players for a season, only for the squad to disband at the end of it. Player movement between squads is highly frequent.¹⁰³ Like a horse’s pedigree, people are often rated not only by their current success, but of their previous squads’ success. Having a good squad pedigree can get you into some of the best squads whether or not you are currently one of the best players in the game. Switching squads too often can get you a reputation as a “squad hopper,” someone who is not trustworthy to have as a regular on your squad because of their likely-hood of leaving your team at a moment’s notice. Because of the longevity of the game, these reputations have been built by many players for well over a decade, and if your name in the game has grown to the point where you cannot get into the squads you want, the only options are to make your own squad (which people will be unlikely to join) or change your name. Changing names does occur in the game, and some people have built reputations over multiple names that people recognise as a single individual. Unfortunately, building your reputation from scratch is very difficult, and if you are good and new, it is often assumed you are playing under a new alias. Staff members can verify this by taking a look at the IP addresses you have played on, and because of this it is still unlikely that a player with a ruined reputation will be able to prosper under their new name.

As the game has been community run for over a decade, the staff that comprises the zone Trench Wars is built from the people playing it. In order to become a staff member you must be an active player who is in good standing with the zone. The staff of Trench Wars has several notable positions and ranks. Starting, the zone has its initial staff position that is known as a Zone Helper, or <ZH> in game. These players have the job of answering general inquiries posed by players within the game and their role is similar to that of general help-line in real life. Event Referees, or <ER>s in game are the next level that is obtainable within staff. These members of staff are tasked with running events for players of the community as well as league games that occur on weekends.

¹⁰³ Their league webpage even has a tool to see the movement of players to and from squads, and even details a players’ squad history. <http://twd.trenchwars.net/onthemove> last viewed on September 29, 2011.

The next position within staff is Moderators (Mods for short). Mods police the zone, and have the ability to ban players who do not follow the rules after being warned. Super Moderators (Smogs for short) come next; they supervise different levels of staff and are the main representatives of opinion voiced for the entire zone. Last there are the System Operators (SysOps for short) who control the entire zone.

There are many rules that constitute what is socially acceptable behaviour within TW. Most notably, is the zone's strict stance on racism. Unlike many games which might only provide a profanity filter (which is optional), TWs actively bans players who consistently use racist or derogatory terminology as insults within the game. This prevalent method of insulting players within games is usually ignored by the companies that run them, but because all zones within the game Continuum are player run, they can dictate what will or will not stand behaviourally. So in TWs, it is not acceptable to insult other players based on race or religion. Insults can still be thrown at each-other, as is evident within the narratives, but they must remain outside of those two main contexts.

There were several discussions of knowing players from in game outside of game, but as a whole it did not appear to be anywhere near as common as with WoW guilds (or other MMORPG guilds). It is my opinion that this is largely because squads play a much smaller role within the social construct of the game than guilds do. As previously stated, squads do not tend to last as long as guilds, and players often switch back and forth between them. While there may be some animosity between players because of this, the league is seen metaphorically speaking more like that of a sports league. It is not uncommon for players in sports leagues to switch teams for bigger contracts, or for better opportunities of success. Likewise, if you are a bad player or team, you might get relegated to a lower division, which is also apparent within TW. A Squad's success in TWD is the only factor that decides if your squad can play in TWL. If a squad fails to make it into TWL there is every possibility it will dissolve or you will lose key players to squads that have made it to TWL. What all this comes down to, is that despite friendships made in the game, they will not stop players from jumping ship, and it is common enough that major friendships are not broken by such moves. While the success a WoW guild has can affect the players in it, and there is movement of people between guilds, there are core groups of players who are dedicated to playing the game with each-other, simply because they get along so well within their social standings. This often leads to guilds having difficulty with content because they do not necessarily have the best players available. This is just seen as an additional obstacle, and that their achievement will be greater because they managed it with inferior gear or players.

Squads within the game decidedly refuse to use many external communication programs. Not a single squad observed used voice chat during league play, and only a few squads created forums or webpage's for communication outside of the game. These tended to some of the fewer older squads whose focus was more on the social aspect than the league aspect of the game play, and were an extreme minority to competitive league squads. After asking several times publically why squads are not interested in using things like voice chat, it seems that the consensus within the game is that players are too concentrated while playing in leagues to talk about what is going on within the game, and that squads already have general strategies in which they intend to employ during a match. Additionally, squads often have players in spectator mode who are tasked with the job of updating the squad as to what they should be doing during the game.

In summary, the social groups within Continuum are equally complex to those of WoW, but behave in a largely different manner. This is in large part due to the design of the game itself, but nevertheless major social connections are made to other players within the game, and are one of the driving factors to why the game has lasted so long. Unlike WoW, where the community is so large it is somewhat ubiquitous, the TW community is small and compact. Players on competing squads know each other, have played with each other in the past, and their reputations within their community drive them to continue playing the game despite its seeming disadvantages to modern games.

Conclusions

While WoW and Continuum are games that are drastically different in style of game-play, they are both classic representations of online-gaming communities. Both games show that it is not just the success of the game developers that drives players to continue playing the game, but the community that players build for themselves that influence their decisions to keep playing. Without the strong communities built within these games, the games themselves would be no more memorable than countless other unsuccessful attempts to create online gaming communities.

Identity within both games is largely driven by the names of the avatars they play, and it is evident in both games that friendships built within the game can last for decades and continue on both without and outside of the games. While these relationships started as something virtual, the emotions and relations are no different than those of the physical reality, and represent an increasing space where people can gain friendships without geographical considerations. This realisation is nothing new, but this research further confirms what others have already discovered (Turkle 1995; Isabella 2007; Meadows 2007; Boellstorff 2008).

I began this research looking for similarities between the two games that I have produced these narratives for. While there are some similarities between them, my research has shown that there are essentially very few similarities. Both games are community driven, with groups that are extremely interested and passionate. These are both content based games however, which need new content to continue to maintain the support of their communities. Continuum is not creating this content at a fast enough rate, which is causing a decrease in its popularity, and may eventually lead to its death as a gaming forum. WoW, on the other hand, is still evolving and changing through the addition of new content, allowing for an ever wider audience. Both of these games have game-play that is indicative of cooperation and team-work. WoW uses teamwork and coordination through guilds, which allows bosses to be defeated during instances. These leads to in-game rewards of items, which can improve game play in future instances. Continuum squads are organized groups that play against each other in order to win leagues, which places the player's name on a board along with the squad's – the competitive play is the driving force in game participation.

As the research only allowed for a year for completion, there are many avenues of research I would have liked to consider but simply did not have the time to. One of the areas I would like to see further research into is the linguistic implications of the CMCs used by players within the game on the general lexicon of the English language. It is already apparent that abbreviations that were once used only within CMC are now common enough to be included within the Oxford English

Dictionairy.¹⁰⁴ That is only the tip of the iceberg, and as the narratives show, the language used within the game is both amazingly complex in terms of its vocabulary, but also amazingly simple in terms of how quickly someone can convey meaning. Instantaneous communication between people online and through cell phones is creating a massive amount of new abbreviations and terms that have been shortened in order to convey meaning faster than before.

Blizzard's RealID system is still new, and the implications of attaching your real identity to those over avatars has yet to be fully seen. Further research into systems like RealID is required and whether this changes online behaviour over time within their games has yet to be seen. As players were already willingly giving this sort of information out, it seems as though this addition might only increase the likely-hood of people sharing their personal identities online, and possibly reduces the risk that people lie about their identity. Blizzard has maintained the largest online gaming community since its release, and its considerations towards what the players want in addition to their quick release of new content make it appear as though they will be able to maintain their large social communities for years to come. The largest threat towards the WoW playerbase seems to come only from Blizzard itself, as it is a strong possibility that they themselves will release a new MMORPG within the near future.

Continuum on the other hand is a community still on the decline. There is still hope within several zones, including Trench Wars, that their efforts of promoting their game within the larger gaming community will be successful. As the game is free, and game-play only having to last thirty minutes a match (or less if you are just playing in a public arena) it has the potential to still attract new players despite its aging graphical interaface. The games communication protocols are surprisingly still well adapted to the players needs, and many players attribute this to being one of the major reasons for the game's long lasting success. This, in addition to the opportunity for players to both run and influence the progress a zone makes, allows for their community to define the future of their game and community. With any luck, Continuum has a strong possibility of outlasting most of the large-scale MMORPGs simply because it does not require the backing of major developers and corperations to continue running the game itself. A surprising advantage for a game like Continuum is that the severs required to run them are relatively inexpensive, and new players with a knack for programming could potentially build new servers for the community to play in.

As is apparent from both narratives, these communities are highly complex. Whether or not either of these games lasts, there is no doubt that the players within them will find ways to keep in

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/293068> last viewed on September 29, 2011.

contact with friends they have gained within the game, either within new gaming venues or in person.

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

Area of Effect – AoE is a phrase used to describe certain spells used within RPGs that do damage over large areas.

Class – Within WoW, this represents the player's specific role within the game. Ex: Mage, Rogue, Warlock, Paladin, Warrior, Priest, Shaman

Computer Mediated Communications – CMC

Continuum (Also known as Subspace) - SS

Damage per Second – DPS

Dragon Kill Points – DKP – A system that guilds use to modify players dice rolls to benefit players who have better attendance or performance records within a guild.

Event Referee - <ER>

Frames per Second - FPS

Frequency (or Freq) – A term used in Continuum to signify which team someone is playing on. Example: “The squad is on freq 552, you should join it.”

Javelin (or Jav) – The second ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone Trench Wars (TW). Within TW, this ship has several abilities, but primarily the ability to shoot bombs that bounce once and shoot forward, and bullets, either a single or triple shot, which shoot backwards. In addition to this the ship has the ability to see stealth and cloaked ships (see Weasel), but uses energy in the process. This ship is used within the TWJD (see TW Leagues) and TWLJ leagues exclusively in addition to all other ships in the TWLB league.

Lancaster (or Lanc) – The seventh ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone TW. Within TW, this ship has the ability to shoot bullets, either two at a time or four at a time. If shot two at a time, it has the ability to quickly shoot twice in succession. This ship has no independent league, but is played within the public arenas and in TWLB.

Leviathan (or Lev) – The fourth ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone TW. Within TW, this ship has the ability to shoot insanely powerful bombs that have a large impact area capable of killing many ships in one shot. The downside is that it is by far the slowest ship in the game, and very difficult to get out of the spawning area. It is almost exclusively used within the public arenas, and even there is occasionally banned from play as it is seen as disruptive to normal gameplay.

Laughing out Loud - LOL

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game – MMORPG or MMO

Moderators – Mods (Super-moderators – Smods)

Oh my God – OMG

Public Group – PUG is a phrase used to describe being in groups that are not part of your specific guild, or who you do not know personally.

Shark – The eighth ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone TW.

Specialization (or spec) – A term used within World of Warcraft that relates to the specific class builds a character might select.

Spectator (or spec or speccing) – A player who is watching in an arena in Continuum but not playing. It can also mean the process of going into spectator mode (spec), or watching a specific person. Examples: “I’m not going to play this one, I’ll be in spec watching.” “I’m speccing John, he’s playing well, you should watch him too.”

Spider (or Spid) – The third ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone TW. Within TW, this ship has the ability to rapidly fire weak bullets. It is most commonly used in basing games such as the public arena or TWBD. In TWBD it is the primary ship of damage dealers to protect the flagroom.

System Operators – Sysops

Terrier (or Terr) – The fifth ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone Trench TW. Within TW, this ship plays an important role of being the only ship that is attachable. Teammates can select a player who is a terrier and press, “F7” to attach, making them a turret on the terrier and allowing the terrier to navigate for them. In TWBD, only one terrier is allowed per team.

Trench Wars – TW

Trench Wars Divisions – A league played within Trench Wars. Additional abbreviations are TWDD for Dueling, TWBD for basing, TWJD for Javelins.

Trench Wars Leagues – The higher, more elite league within Trench Wars. Only the top TWD squads play in TWL.

Warbird (or WB) – The first ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone TW.

Weasel – The seventh ship in the online game Continuum and the Zone TW.

World of Warcraft – WoW

Zone Helpers - <ZH>

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