THE WOW FACTOR: AN INVESTIGATION OF SOCIAL NEEDS,

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION, AND COMMUNITY

IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the

Valenti School of Communication

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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By

Sarah J. Tidwell

December, 2011

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the relationship between World of Warcraft (WoW) players and the concepts of social needs, interpersonal relationships, and community from the player's perspective. The significance of gaming in society, a detail of my experience with WoW, and a review of recent literature provide a basic understanding of the WoW experience and its current place within society, the gaming world, and the media.

Thirteen WoW players participated in informal interviews on an online forum about their experiences with the game, why they play, and the various meanings – socially and personally – the game has in their lives. Four themes emerged from the data: connection, positive reinforcement, power/control, and the intersection of real life and Azeroth. Results signify that participants overall have a very positive view of WoW and its effect on their lives, despite acknowledging the critical views shared by various non-players and the media.

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Special thanks to my aunt, Claire Barker. You have always been of great support in all my pursuits. Thank you for being so actively involved in my life and encouraging in my educational and career quests.

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Mere words will never fully express the extent of my gratitude and respect for my mother, Betty Tidwell. Thank you for teaching me about the limitless powers of reading, learning, and exploring the world creatively. Thank you for your unending love and support throughout all the years, endeavors, and challenges. Thank you for believing in me. I will forever be in your debt.

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## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1 – Kyraen <Infinite Order> of Draenor-US

I am Kyraen, a level 85 Discipline Night Elf priest and raiding member in <Infinite Order>, a guild on the Draenor-US server. I have been fighting the horde and scourge for nearly seven years. In fact, at the time of this writing, I have spent 137 days, 22 hours, 20 minutes and 52 seconds over the past six years questing, raiding, and strolling about in Azeroth.

Away from the computer, my name is Sarah. I am 31 years old, married, and working toward my second Master's degree for more opportunities at the community college where I work as a counselor and adjunct instructor. I'm fairly successful. My

real battle has been between real life and life in Azeroth, as Kyraen. I am a World of Warcraft (WoW) addict.

In this thesis, I will investigate the social needs that WoW, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), fulfills for its players and the various ways it fulfills those needs. I will also explore interpersonal relationships, as well as the concept of community, in real life and in WoW. By moderating an online discussion group of WoW gamers and reflexively exploring my own experiences, I hope to understand the implications and complicated nature of existing in two worlds.

**The Significance of Gaming in Society and Health**

As technology continues to weave itself into every facet of our lives, we must adapt to using such advances in ways that are not harmful to our lives. The Internet and its new landscape of computer gaming, MMORPGs, have brought us into a greater depth and breadth of reality. Not only are our economy and pocketbooks affected by having to purchase software, monthly subscriptions, and computer hardware upgrades, we are susceptible to sacrificing our lives and wellbeing – physically, emotionally, and socially.

In 2007, the American Medical Association (AMA) noted the seriousness of video game addiction by encouraging the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to add the affliction to its next edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the publication used by mental health professionals to diagnose and ultimately assist those who are mentally troubled. The AMA also agreed to work with other medical organizations to work towards educating the general population, as well as parents, about the appropriate use of video games (American Medical Association, 2007). This admonition, alone, is enough to take gaming addiction seriously.

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Some real-world examples demonstrate some of the worst physical, mental, and social issues that arise through gaming addiction, including death, suicide, and divorce. For example, in 2005, a 28-year-old South Korean man died from heart failure stemming from exhaustion after playing Starcraft, a strategy game, for fifty hours with minimal breaks (BBC News, 2005). His death occurred not long after being terminated from his job for excessive absences, supposedly due to game play. According to China View (2005), a young girl nicknamed "Snowly" died in October of 2005 after spending many hours playing WoW over several days. The news service reported that she had spent that time preparing for a challenging task in the game and was feeling tired. One week later a funeral was held in game to honor Snowly. Unfortunately, the memorial was eclipsed by another gamer, "Nan Ren Gu Shi" (China View, 2005). In 2006, another reported death occurred in Beijing, China, where a 13-year-old boy committed suicide after spending 36 continuous hours playing WoW. The boy's suicide note offered his reason – he wished "to join the heroes of the game he worshipped" (Fox News, 2006).

These tragic stories serve as wakeup calls to gamers, addicts, and parents who allow their children to play videogames. No one should feel his or her worth comes from a fictitious world that can be disconnected through a plug, a storm, or server maintenance. This is not to diminish the amount of time, work, and skill that many games require, but it's to emphasize the need for balance and control to live healthy lives. From experience, I know many gamers consume large amounts of energy drinks, junk food, and sometimes partake of alcohol during Computer Olympics, LAN (local area network) parties, or other social encounters. Sleep is what takes place when the party is over. One doesn't need to be a scientist or a medical doctor to realize the possible repercussions of

exhaustion, poor nutrition, and the simultaneous combination of stimulants and depressants on the body's delicate chemistry.



*Figure 2.* Photograph of a 2003 LAN party.

In addition to affecting one's body and psyche, online gaming addictions also wreak havoc on relationships. In February of 2008, Yahoo! Games posted an article detailing the woes of Jocelyn, a 28-year-old who was recently divorced, primarily due to her ex-husband's addiction to WoW. Jocelyn explained her situation with the following statement: "I'm real, and you're giving me up for a fantasy land. You're destroying your life, your six-year marriage, and you're giving it up for something that isn't even real" (Yahoo! Games, 2008). Similarly, many women are joining the ranks of Warcraft Widows, a group of women who feel their relationships have suffered due to their

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partners' WoW addictions. A number of these women participate in self-help groups to cope and develop strategies to combat the problem (Naish, 2008).

Gaming addictions, particularly WoW, have also negatively influenced work relationships. In December of 2008, *The New York Times* published an article that discusses employers' views on considering WoW players as new hires. One recruiter suggested that his friend not mention WoW on his resume anywhere, regardless of position or relevance to the job. The recruiter explained that employers tend to avoid hiring such enthusiasts due to their intense focus on the game and irregular "sleeping patterns" as potential problems for job success (Wortham, 2008). On a personal note, a family friend, an engineer, was fired for not accomplishing the required amount of work. His termination came as no surprise since he spent much of his time at work in Azeroth.

In 2008, WoW and other online games came under fire by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) through the accusation that such games are "one of the top reasons for college drop-outs in the US" (Selfe, 2009). They also noted that many "virtual reality games are inherently addictive, just as with the potential for the abuse of recreational psychotropic drugs and alcohol" (Selfe, 2009). Still, Selfe (2009), in the popular business technology magazine, *Red Herring*, suggests that the FCC note that not every person who elects to play the game will become addicted and should not be considered the only cause of poor retention rates.

The parent-child relationship is also frequently discussed in terms of the challenges of gaming moderation and distinctions between fantasy and reality. One example of the tensions faced is found on a thread in the Berkeley Parents Network. Anon, a parent of a 17-year-old, claims her son plays WoW "compulsively" and upon

having the game removed "he goes on strike and doesn't go to school" (Berkeley Parents Network, 2008). Several other parents responded to this post by encouraging Anon to "go to the mat" and consider sending young gaming addicts to lengthy summer camps as a way to break the obsession (Berkeley Parents Network, 2008). Conversely, another parent, Jackie, suggested that Anon try to understand the game, by likening it to "varsity football" and communicate their understanding to Anon's son (Berkeley Parents Network, 2008).

Other parents soon posted their concerns about teens who want to begin playing the popular game. Concerns ranged from violence level and addiction to management tactics. Fiona finds the "physical problem…spend[ing] all that time sitting in one position and not getting any exercise." She then stated, though, that "different people have different susceptibilities" (Berkeley Parents Network, 2008).

These concerns are valid, as evidenced by the previous discussion of game-related deaths caused by exhaustion and suicide, divorce, and declining quality of life in today's population. Recent media attention to this relatively new affliction has spurred researchers to begin investigating the realm of online gaming. Despite the negative attention, however, MMORPGS are starting to receive some positive acknowledgements. In the same Berkeley Parents Network thread, other participants countered that similar games are helpful in the development of "skills in leadership, teamwork and project management" (Wortham, 2008). Some parents used the forum to share their stories of parental policing and the benefits their children, and sometimes themselves, have enjoyed from responsible gaming. For example, one parent encouraged other parents to take an active role in their children's life through openly addressing concerns and being upfront

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about expectations regarding priorities, such as, homework completion, chores, and maintaining adequate grades. WOW Mom shared what her son has learned through WoW game play – becoming skilled "at working cooperatively since each character has different abilities" and "money management skills since you get gold and have to buy things but have to watch your budget" (Berkeley Parents Network). Similarly, Tim suggested that WoW "instills…work ethic by requiring the player to work steadily and persistently over weeks and months towards a goal. It teaches TANSTAAFL: 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch'" (Berkeley Parents Network, 2008).

In *Computerworld*, Perkins (2009) discusses the impact and use of computer games in the workplace. Perkins points out that "games teach and reinforce specialized skills…without damaging expensive equipment or putting anyone in danger." He illustrates this with examples of training and "warm[ing]-up" laparoscopic surgeons prior to surgery and the military's usage of simulators to assist in the training of foot soldiers and pilots (Perkins, 2009). In 2002, the Army released its first version of *America's Army*, a free game that provides training and mission simulations with a "virtual Army experience" (http://www.americasarmy.com/intel/versions.php). Perkins (2009) notes that games also serve as a forum for less-obtrusive advertising. Companies and organizations like Honda, Disney and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation use games to promote their products, cars and movies, and overall mission. Perkins (2009) concludes his article with suggestions for improving business or training through the utilization of concepts in games like WoW. He praises WoW's "real-time feedback" and the usage of quests in meeting goals. He suggests using feedback panels similar to

WoW's user interface to visually and audibly reward and motivate in the customer service realm (Perkins, 2009).

As the AMA and other organizations in the world begin to combat a new foe through educating parents and players, it is important to consider the influences that may reinforce such an addiction and its perception among those afflicted. We must learn about gamers and their communities to meet those people at their current level of reality and interest so that we can develop and send strategic messages about the susceptibility of addiction and its prevention while continuing to harness the benefits and opportunities that abound in online gaming.

**My XP (experience)**

November 23, 2004. I waited for this day for a year and a half. I had finished my last midterm and was hustling to my last day of work before Thanksgiving festivities. My mother, the kind soul she is, volunteered to snag the game from my local big box store as soon as they opened. If I waited until I was free from work, all copies would be gone. My lunchtime approached, and I checked my cell phone. I had numerous voicemails chronicling my mom's real-life quest to hunt a copy. She encountered lines of college kids and adults waiting at the doors. After the third store, her mission was accomplished. The excitement of WoW was similar to the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels, but more engaging, thanks to technology. Before I could begin playing, I was required to select a server and create a customized avatar to represent me in game. Everything is in your control; it's better than real life.

Upon stepping foot in Azeroth, a mythical setting created by Blizzard Entertainment for Warcraft, an earlier series of real-time strategy games that provided the

geography and lore surrounding WoW, I began completing tasks – or quests – to gain experience and rewards. In the process of accomplishing these quests, I learned about the different abilities I possessed as Kyraen: (a) attacks, in the form of melee and spell casting, (b) buffs, spells that make me temporarily stronger, and (c) even professions, such as mining, alchemy, or tailoring to name a few, for acquiring new items and gold, the in-game currency. As I gained experience, I leveled up to 85, the current cap. As I rose in level, my abilities grew. I learned more spells, dealt more damage, and wore stronger armor. Sometimes, in order to accomplish more difficult goals, quests required me to team up with other players.

Over time and many quests, I began to find people who not only played their characters well, but also were fun to work with. Since each character name is unique to the server, WoW has a built in "friends list" feature to make it easy to keep up with your favorite players. WoW also enables players to join a guild, which is a group of at least ten people who become part of an in-game organization to socialize and receive or give assistance. My first guild was Minions of the Alliance; I was a charter member, eventually an officer, and one of the most-respected priests in the guild. Then, WoW life began to affect my real life.

We started a website, www.minionsofthealliance.com, with forums that ranged from how-to guides for each class to random chatter and from profession guides to a group sign-up area. My husband, Kaldein, a level 80 Night Elf rogue and real-life software developer, set up and maintained the first version – which ended up taking a fair amount of time. As our guild grew and became more skilled, we were able to begin larger

group quests called raids, which consisted of assembling 10 to 40 people, depending on which dungeon we were trying to conquer.

Typing in game became laborious as I made sure everyone had the gear and consumables needed, knew the timing and role for each fight, and was ready to begin. As a result, we purchased Ventrilo, a guild voice chat solution that enabled us to be in game, fighting, and – through the use of a chat client and headset – point out any problem areas and adjust game play before a wipe, having all members of a group die in battle. Between using and maintaining a chat client and guild website, serving as an officer to keep members in line with the code of conduct, and continually participating in dungeon runs for better gear for more efficient game play in end-game raids occasionally added via software updates, I was putting in some serious time.

About two years had passed and we were growing rapidly. As with all societies, our microcosm began experiencing dissent and conflicting personalities within the guild, which soon crossed over to create a divide in the leadership team, in particular between the Guildmaster and Kaldein and me. After a long, irrational, and bitter string of conversations over a newly admitted member and his conduct, I quit the guild. Soon, the Guildmaster kicked out my husband. I had a lot of mixed emotions after that. I had spent a lot of time with these folks, including time with some of them in real life. Still angry, disappointed, and feeling righteous because I stuck to my guns in an argument, I withdrew from the game.

During this time, I began to realize how enmeshed I had become with the game. My friends were characters. My hobbies consisted of killing fictitious monsters and Horde. My success was based on my level, title, and leadership position within the game.

I knew key websites for reading up on fight strategies and which add-on programs were helpful. I enjoyed participating in world events, a series of quests in Azeroth for different holidays that parallel real life. Without WoW, I noticed I was no longer struggling to make it to work on time; I was well-rested and almost pleasant to be around in the mornings. I socialized with old friends from graduate school and work buddies. Instead of eating frozen pizzas and Chinese take-out in front of my computer, I cooked healthier foods and ate dinner at the kitchen table with my husband. We soon began exercising with our newfound time and found that we physically felt better, as well.

**Community and Consumerism: A Gamer's Environment**

I hadn't realized how that highly anticipated 2004 Thanksgiving holiday of marathon gaming had turned into more than two years of eating, sleeping, working, and playing WoW. When I wasn't playing WoW or discussing it with my husband, I was thinking about it. I scoured numerous websites devoted to some aspect of the game and watched YouTube videos involving WoW and any other related topic. I've been twice to the annual BlizzCon convention in Anaheim, California, which features WoW among other current video game titles. There, gaming, costume, and dance contests determine who can best play, look, and move like their character. During scheduled times and places for server meetings, you can meet guildmates and people you may have played with in Azeroth. At the event's closing ceremonies, they end with a concert complete with accompanying videos from game play. In 2008, Video Games Live (http://www.videogameslive.com), an orchestra specializing in music from video games, and Level 80 Elite Tauren Chieftain, a band composed of Blizzard employees, consisting of the CEO, art director, producer, concept artist and game designer, and senior

programmer, both performed shows related to Azeroth happenings. Level 80 Elite Tauren Chieftains' avatars often appear on tour in WoW.



*Figure 3.* Level 80 Elite Tauren Chieftain's avatars perform in-game concert.

My experiences weren't unique. In a world where no one person, event, or thing is isolated, other forms of online entertainment, including YouTube, have helped perpetuate the WoW culture and its addictive nature. Television features advertisements for WoW with celebrities such as Ozzy Osbourne, Mr. T, William Shatner, and Steven Van Zandt speaking enthusiastically about their WoW identities, complete with action scenes of custom avatars to each celebrity's likeness. On October 4, 2006, Comedy Central's popular show *South Park* aired "Make Love, Not Warcraft," which told the tale of the South Park crews as adventurers in Azeroth. During the episode, their human forms begin to suffer when long hours of game play keep them from exercising or even practicing basic hygiene.

In addition to television, YouTube offers a myriad of WoW-related videos that range from detailed how-to guides for various in-game fights, dramatic shorts created by players using their characters, and humorous recordings of fights gone terribly wrong.

Some are so well known they've become Internet memes, pop culture ideas or concepts acquired through friends or media, including *The Internet Is for Porn!*, *Peanut Butter Jelly Time – Tauren,* and the infamous *Leroy Jenkins*. The latter became so well known it actually was included as a question on the popular game show *Jeopardy* during the "College Championship" competition.

Websites are another popular form of entertainment and strategy for those interested in WoW. Many sites offer gaming tips, information on armor, quest guides, and high-end boss strategies. Others include character statistics, guild recruitment, and raid sign-ups.

WoW has continued to make a significant cultural impact through the sale of game-related products such as artwork, t-shirts, plush toys, and sword replicas. Additionally, players can purchase expensive detailed figurines personalized to look like their characters, right down to the armor. Game soundtracks are also available for purchase on iTunes. A black market has surfaced, as well, for selling in-game currency in exchange for real money, character-leveling services, and WoW accounts complete with high-end, well-geared characters.

**My XP (experience) – continued**

My time away from WoW had its perks, but I still missed the feelings of success and type of socializing it typically provided. I truly felt like I, my character, or some odd combination of the two of us, belonged.

During my hiatus, my husband continued to play. After six months or so, I was ready to play again. We talked and agreed that it's just a game and it was silly to get so wrapped up in it. We should play until it stops being fun. No longer would we run raids

that took four or more hours to complete; instead, we would play casually. I held true to that for almost two years, during the time we were without a guild. I could, and would, log on for thirty minutes at a time, or accomplish a quest and log off for the day. Before long, though, we found a new guild to call home. We began raiding, and the downward spiral continued until there were once again crumbs in my keyboard and bags under my glazed-over eyes. The laundry was stacking up. We were out of clean dishes. My friends wondered why I dropped off the face of the earth. The truth? I was sucked back into my 24'' widescreen monitor. This time, though, I was aware of what was happening.

So I'm back where I'm started, but this time with awareness. It's still a challenge today to make myself log off. I try to find every excuse to stay online, from the promise of legendary loot to helping a lowbie, a low-leveled player. I try to play only on weekends and holidays with a specific task or time limit in mind when I log on to the game. I now recognize that, although my in-game friends are real outside of Azeroth, I need to respect and nurture the relationships I have outside of WoW. I appreciate not having a crusty keyboard, a pile of laundry that's overtaking the bedroom, and being in touch with the real world. Once again, I function at work and school and have relationships with my friends and family. I think it's important to note that I did receive a legendary reward from completing my hardest quest – from Level 85 Night Elf to 30 year-old human – my life.

**Purpose, Objectives, and Study Organization**

Given my experiences, I am interested in the ways participants create and maintain interpersonal relationships in-game, as well as the ways in which those relationships influence and relate to meaningful connections in real life. How do WoW

relationships contribute to the construction of community online? How permeable is the boundary between online and real life? What factors determine this permeability?

In the next chapter, I explore the complexities of gaming in relation to constructs of (a) community, (b) interpersonal relationships, and (c) psychosocial well-being. I close the chapter with two research questions that will guide my study. Chapter III then details my research methods for data collection and analysis, and Chapter IV presents my findings. In the final chapter, I discuss practical and theoretical implications and offer suggestions for future research.

## Chapter II

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Gaming and Community**

To understand MMORPG gamers, one must recognize the notable force of the gaming community. The main feature that separates MMORPG from other types of games is the heavy focus on player interaction. Upon entering Azeroth, players see not only themselves, but also other players' avatars with their in-game name floating above their avatar's head. Often, players have another identifying notation under their name that indicates to which guild, or social organizations, they belong. Throughout the game, many quests and achievements require the assistance of other gamers to fulfill other necessary roles to propel gamers towards success.

Guilds make the game easier. New gamers typically experience the often frustrating experience of having to use the in-game "looking for group" tool in order to find other players who are seeking assistance on the same quest. This process usually frustrates participants because you never know what quality of player you will get – helpful and knows their role or distracted and oblivious to the group leader's directions.

Once you find people you enjoy playing with, Blizzard makes it easy to keep track of them with an in-game friends list. This feature allows players to remember each other and have "go to" people for other in-game challenges. Guilds provide structure to allow players to socially organize through a private chat channel only guild members can see, including a guild information panel complete with roster, achievement information, and event calendar.

Not all players belong to a guild, but with the latest game expansion, Cataclysm, Blizzard has added a greater motivation for players to participate in guilds through the addition of guild levels. Guilds can earn guild achievements that allow their members to earn certain "perks" such as increased gold for killing monsters or more powerful skills, like cooking recipes. For example, when a guild's members fish up 10,000 fish from fishing pools the guild completes the "That's A Lot of Bait" achievement. The reward for completing this achievement is the Seafood Magnifique Feast recipe. Seafood Magnifique Feasts allow one player to combine two Highland Guppies, two Lavascale Catfish, and two Fathom Eels over a cooking fire to produce one feast. The player can then set the feast out during a raid to feed all team members (up to forty). Each player who "eats" on the feast for ten or more seconds gains a "well fed" buff. This buff will provide players with ninety stamina points, and ninety points in another helpful stat, such as greater crit (chance for a critical strike to occur), relative to each character's class and specialization for one hour or until the character dies. When raiding, characters need to have every enhancement possible to increase the chances of defeating raid bosses. This encourages guilds to work together to complete such achievements. This is one way Blizzard promotes community within the gaming community.

*Figure 4:* Cooking recipe for Seafood Magnifique Feast.

Researchers have acknowledged the effect technology and the Internet have had

on the concept of community. "[W]holly or primarily online communities" have been

identified as a current and continued area of study (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010, p.

1084). This "reconceptualization of community" has moved the idea of community from

being rooted in a geographical sense to one of networks (Haythornthwaite & Kendall,

2010, p. 1084). One direct example from WoW has been the emergence of Christian-

based and military-based guilds. These guilds allow players to find those seeking a

similar background to socialize and work towards in-game goals together.

Scholars once questioned whether community could be established online. Today, scholars wonder whether it can exist without the convenience the Internet affords. The Internet allows relationships and community to grow despite real-life disturbances such as moving to a different city or changing schools or jobs. Research has suggested that the Internet does not cause "Americans to lose their friendship ties" (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010, p. 1089). Rather, it provides a forum conducive to the creation of new friendships while still providing an instant and convenient way of staying linked with old and current friends (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010).

WoW exemplifies this phenomenon by serving as a way for people to satisfy their social need of belonging. Through the use of in-game text-based chat, voice chat clients, and other vehicles of connectivity across the Internet (e.g., YouTube, websites, Facebook), players discuss in-game and out-of-game topics and find a genuine camaraderie that is difficult to find in today's fast pace of life. My guildmates and WoW friends are mostly those I've met by pure happenstance in game, although I do play with four friends I first knew outside of Azeroth. It is my understanding through my experience with WoW that this type of socialization is not uncommon.

Kollock (1999) articulated three WoW-related motivations of participants in online communities: anticipated reciprocity, increased reputation, and sense of efficacy. These benefits along with "strong friendship, group unity, accomplishment, and the ability to ignore disliked people" keep members involved in the game (Brignall & Van Valey, 2007, p. 3-4). It is clear why guilds, the representations of the WoW online community, are of such high importance – they provide an important structure to social life in Azeroth. Guilds serve as a "stable social backdrop to many game activities," offer

a foundation or history that promotes intraguild grouping, and a motivation to spend more time in-game (Ducheneaut et al., 2007, p. 839). Additionally, guilds serve as a place to exchange resources and services.

Communities in MMORPGs provide many benefits to players, but they are a lot of work. Maintaining or growing a guild requires scheduled events, new member trial periods to ensure good fit within the group, and constant member involvement to develop and maintain an identity within a game. As with many other activities in life, one has to participate to reap the rewards. As an MMORPG is a microcosm of society, a guild member can be likened to that of a citizen. Citizens are involved and give back to their communities, whereas guild members take an active role in regularly helping their guildmates (Pirius & Cree, 2010).

Researchers point out that WoW fits into a fresh way of considering the idea of tribalism. Tribalism is the grouping and subgrouping within a pre-existing social structure. It provides a sense of identity and separation from others (Brignall & Van Valey, 2007). Tribalism provides a framework for understanding the many communities one may belong to in Azeroth – faction (good guys vs. bad guys), guild, rank within guild (officer), raid team, or PvP (player-versus-player) team. These memberships contribute to players' reports of "feeling more important in game" and "more able to freely express themselves" (Brignall & Van Valey, 2007, p. 4).

Johnson and colleagues (2009) compared WoW guilds to real-life gangs and found them both to be affected by a shared "team dynamic" (p. 1). Their research proposes that online and real-life groups form in similar ways and that human behavior

may "be driven by common endogenous features rather than setting specific exogenous details" (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 10).

Although many players enjoy taking part in guilds, others choose to remain unattached due to "guild politics," responsibilities, "drama," and the "grind" involved with working towards achieving end-game goals (Brignall & Van Valey, 2007, p. 4; Ducheneaut et al., 2007, p. 839). As with all communities and relationships, guilds must be given proper attention and maintenance to ensure their survivability. Researchers have found certain elements in guild structure, such as smaller size (i.e., 45-50 members) and "specialization" could help maintain a healthy community (Ducheneaut et al, 2007, p. 845). Specialization can help in being clear as to the guild and its players' purpose (e.g. raiding, pvp, or leveling) and allow for a greater interest in absorbing other players who are on a similar level with like goals.

**Gaming and Interpersonal Communication**

When one explores the idea of community, it is only natural to consider one of its building blocks, interpersonal relationships, and the communication that sustains them. In 2005, Yee found that MMORPG players create important relationships and have significant emotional experiences in-game. His research found that players, regardless of gender, were emotionally invested based on the amount of time they spent in game and their willingness to consider themselves addicted to the game. Many of the participants in his study reported that they participate in-game with a family member or romantic partner (Yee, 2005). He also references in-game relationship events and significant milestones, such as in-game weddings, but does not recognize that some players' real-life relationships have roots in a virtual world.

*Figure 5*: Screenshot from an in-game wedding.

More specific concepts related to interpersonal communication have also been considered in terms of MMORPGs. For example, Visser and Antheunis (2010) investigated adolescent WoW players' social competence against the "Internet-affected social compensation hypothesis" (p. 18) to learn what, if any, effect the MMORPG has on this population of players. The study found that WoW had "no direct effect…on the social well-being of adolescents" (Visser & Antheunis, 2010, p. 18). Additionally, the researchers concluded that the social competence of WoW gamers was increased due to the larger number of people they engage in communicative exchanges.

Another article discusses the negative impact MMORPGs have on nonverbal communication. Moore, Ducheneaut, and Nickell (2007) show concern that gamers who participate in MMORPGs may not be as skilled in conversation turn-taking techniques and using and/or understanding eye gaze gesturing due to avatars' lack of detail. In another study, Ratan and colleagues (2010) investigated trust and self-disclosure as they relate to "[s]ocial structures and communication patterns" (p. 107). The researchers found that the tighter the social group, the greater the trust. Self-disclosure also strengthened trust. Their research also confirmed previous studies' findings that trust cascaded from more intimate groups to the less intimate groups (Ratan et al., 2010).

In 2009, Taylor and Taylor demonstrated that "social communication and group cohesion" were the most significant motivators for MMORPG gameplay (p. 613). Their data also pointed out discontinuity among participant feedback. The questionnaire responses suggested that players' real-world and online relationships did not conflict substantially. However, the data collected from the interview alluded to a significant amount of conflict between the two worlds (Taylor & Taylor, 2009).

**Gaming Relationship Typologies**

Ang and Zaphiris (2010) found that MMORPG guild members can typically be categorized into one of three "major social roles with distinct interaction styles" (p. 610). The members most central to a guild's cohesiveness are the experienced core members, who then have a subgroup of "social players" (p. 610). Members of this subgroup contribute and maintain a guild's social climate by establishing relationships through regular communication with the human behind the avatar. "[T]he more the social players

in the guild, the more connected, the denser and the closer they are" (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010, p. 610).

Guild members fulfilling the periphery social role are those who are not fused in the inner circle of core players, but still provide involvement through in-game dialogue and occasional leadership. Unlike experienced core members, these members typically seek help in addition to serving as a resource to newer players. These newer players combined with those less-engaged senior players make up the tertiary and most distant level of social roles – the periphery level (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010, p. 609).

On a related note, researchers Nardi and Harris (2006) reported three types of social linkages found throughout WoW game play – "communities, 'knots', and pairwise collaborations with friends" (p. 6). Communities are groups that share many features – in-game and/or out-of-game priorities, history, etc. Two examples of communities in WoW include guilds and faction. Knots comprise a much less stable linkage exemplified by pick-up-groups (PUGs) where members group together for a short period of time to accomplish a specific goal and then disband. Pairwise collaborations with friends, on the other hand, is the most intimate linkage of the typology and the closest to real-life friends. These players frequently keep track of each other via their WoW friends list, an in-game tool that displays a player's status and location. Players may engage in private conversations in-game called whispers, collaborate to help each other in trade skills by acquiring gear, materials, or crafting items, and by simply questing together when multiple players are not required (Nardi & Harris, 2006).

In 2010, Hong and Chen began work towards the development of a theory specifically for massively multiplayer online (MMO) games. They used "theory of

relationship and a consideration of how the medium...the MMO environment, might influence the relationships formed" to expand the notion of social interaction (Hong & Chen, 2010, p. 2). Using the findings of Nardi and Harris (2006) along with Schulz's (1958) fundamental interpersonal relations orientation (FIRO) approach, the investigators considered the relational needs, medium influences, personal influences, and social architectures – or purposeful design of an environment to solicit particular social behaviors – to more systematically evaluate MMO interactions as relationships. Ultimately, Hong and Chen (2010) created five relational typologies for the "unique nature of WoW relationships and their connection with offline relationships" (p. 14).

The first type is Casual Interaction and Knots. In-game relationships in this category are similar to a tall person helping a not-so-tall person obtain a top-shelf item at the grocery store. It's all about the goal. The social architectures that frame these relationships "only provide incentive for singular interactions…or casual conversations seldom lead[ing] players to develop persistent relationships" (Hong & Chen, 2010, p. 15).

The second category is the Persistent and Hierarchical Relationships. In-game social architectures that shape relationships in this category are raids and arena teams. These constructs have a progression sequence of boss kills, server and world rankings, or some set of direct measurable achievement that is sought out by various teams. For these teams to be successful, organization or a group hierarchy, complete with leadership ranks with corresponding roles, is necessary to coordinate the members and necessary tasks of the group. These categories are about achieving some particular goal and inclusion; although, exclusion and subsequent conflict is inevitable (Hong & Chen, 2010).

Becoming Friends and Developing Affections is the third category of relationships in WoW. These relationships are often more personal and tend to bear labels such as 'friends' or 'cliques' and the right to privileges like real names and other behind-the-avatar information (Hong & Chen, 2010, p. 18). These relationships are somewhat stable, have some level of trust and interdependence, and promote a spirit of companionship throughout their adventures (p. 19).

Hong and Chen's fourth category, Long-Term Commitment and Companionship, is very similar to that of the third, but with an extended history. The priority has shifted from in-game achievements to simply socializing with each other. They put the player above the game (Hong & Chen, 2010).

Hyperreal Relationships, the final category of WoW relationships, involves the intersection of online and offline worlds. The offline relationship is still dominated by play from the alternative world where it originally started. as it is the relationship's linking pin. Since the relationship is primarily rooted in the online game world, the growth or maturation of the relationship may take a unique path. The mediated nature gives players more control over the level of closeness of their relationships (Hong & Chen, 2010).

Ultimately, Hong and Chen's (2010) relational typology offers an interesting framework for understanding how gaming relationships evolve. It highlights what some gamers may perceive as a bionic relationship that gives them additional control and safety while still enabling them to reap the benefits of communication and connectedness.

**Gaming, Psychosocial Well-Being, and Addiction**

In addition to considering the societal impact of MMORPGs and the communities that form in-game, it is important to reflect on the effect gaming has on a person's physiological and psychological health and the potential for addiction. An obvious draw to MMORPGs is the opportunity to escape from real-life stressors and responsibilities (Young, 2009). They also provide an environment with many elements requiring participant collaboration, which lends itself well to social relationships in game. These social relationships, combined with the variety of game-play options, transform a mere game into an extension of reality. Avatars become friends who are added to friend lists, who then connect via Facebook, and finally exchange phone numbers or even meet. The two worlds become blurred.

One example can be found in Klimmt et al.'s (2010) research, which states that "controlling a character or fulfilling a role while playing video games shapes players' self-concept" (p. 335). The researchers also suggest that gaming is a way for people to transcend their typical self-perceptions. Trying to learn more of the relationship between gamers and their avatars, Blinka (2008) reported that a significant amount of his participants identified with their avatars, and those who were younger tended to have a stronger identification with their avatar. This finding would be consistent with the widely accepted notion that people are more readily influenced in their younger years, but as we age our identity and perceptions tend to be a little more difficult to sway.

Experiencing different roles or versions of oneself can be particularly enticing, especially in a controlled, safe environment that can be escaped with a flip of a switch. Only a small leap is required to imagine the possible implications of this type of freedom.

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It provides the opportunity to be a better version of one's self. The meek can become leaders. When one explores new or underdeveloped aspects of their self-concept and receives positive feedback, it is easy to understand why individuals may begin to engage in online gaming more frequently.

Interviews conducted with players have highlighted some central themes concerning their perceptions and experiences with online games. One of the main participation draws reported is escapism from negativity perceived in real life. Gamers are able to use their online world and role as a coping mechanism. Despite this seemingly positive use of games, Hussain and Griffiths (2009) found many concerning themes. For example, many of the interviewees mentioned some difficulty in existing in both their online world and real life. The researchers also reported that they found evidence of addiction, problems with excessive online gaming, and some level of effect on players' relationships throughout their data (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009).

Researchers have found that in similar situations there may be a risk of negative repercussions for young gamers – addiction. Players who view their avatars more favorably than their real selves were likely to aspire to be more like their in-game character. These young gamers were more likely to be addicted to the MMORPG and their avatar (Smahel, Blinka, & Ledabyl, 2008). Similarly, research has also suggested that disproportionate online gaming "was significantly correlated with psychological and behavioral 'dependence,'" and dependent players exhibited some significant elements of addiction (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009, p. 563).

In 2009, Hsu, Wen, and Wu found five important factors that can assist in predicting addiction to MMORPGs. The researchers list curiosity, role-playing,

belonging, obligation, and reward as the five predictors that a person will continue to spend their time or even increase time spent in-game. In a similar study, researchers conducted a survey to determine player motivation and its link to "addictive involvement" (Dauriat et al., 2011, p. 185). They identified five motivations to play: achievement, socializing, immersion, relaxing, and escaping. The study concluded that three of the five motivations – achievement, escapism, and socializing – could be used to anticipate addictive tendencies (Dauriat et al., 2011). In addition to the research on motivational factors, Peters and Malesky (2008) suggest that personality factors such as "agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and extraversion may predict addiction" (p. 481).

Furthering the concerning topic of addiction, researchers have begun documenting physiological effects related to gaming addiction. Chuang (2006) found that the increased "behavioral and higher mental activities," in addition to photosensitivity, appeared to contribute to the cause of seizures in young adults. He suggested that MMORPGs should consistently display warnings in their instructions and on websites. Chaung (2006) also discussed the need for general awareness for those working in helping occupations, such as physicians and teachers.

Considering overall health, Smyth (2007) found that gamers who played MMORPGs had "worse health, worse sleep quality, and greater interference in 'real-life' socializing" (p. 717). A specific example of possible consequence can be found in Grüsser, Thalemann, and Griffiths' (2007) results from a survey of gamers. Their data demonstrated that 11.9% of those surveyed met the diagnostic criteria of addiction in terms of gaming behaviors.

**Summary and Research Questions**

From my review of recent literature, MMORPG gaming has a direct effect on its participants as individuals and members of various interpersonal relationships. The extension of reality provided by modern technology coupled with the phenomenal amount of control inherent in its setup provides people with almost whatever social or personal experience they may desire. When logging in, players subconsciously answer the question, "Who do I want to be today?" Once logged in, players are immersed in a whole new world. They find themselves part of intricate communities with different purposes and roles in which they take part. Research has also demonstrated that MMORPGs cultivate a different varietal of interpersonal relationships.

The large degree of control over one's in-game presence and interpersonal relationships, coupled with the sense of belonging one obtains by participating in online gaming, contributes to why players keep logging back into the game. Researchers have started exploring the possibility of gaming addiction and have started identifying characteristics that may be indicative of problematic behavior. Additionally, research has started documenting possible physiological conditions that may result from gaming behaviors.

To this point, societal concern and research primarily focus on the non-gamer point of view by speaking of the effects of gaming addiction – physically, psychologically, and socially. Communities in gaming are explored by outsiders – researchers whose interest is academic in nature rather than understanding the people who participate. My sole purpose in this thesis is to gain understanding of community, social needs, and interpersonal communication from the gamer's perspective. Why do we

play WoW? How is it fulfilling to us? Toward this effort, I will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What social need(s) does World of Warcraft fulfill?

RQ2: How do players' in-game and real lives intersect and influence one another?

**Chapter III**

**METHODOLOGY**

To answer the aforementioned research questions, I moderated semi-structured interview conversations over a two-week period between October 9, 2011, and October 23, 2011, with 13 adults who play World of Warcraft. The moderated conversations occurred on an online message board or forum accessed through a public website (www.wowfactorthesis.info) that I registered through GoDaddy.com and created early during the year using phpBB, a free, open-sourced bulletin board system. The website included unlimited access to information describing the purpose of my study, the informed consent, and my contact information. The bulletin board system also provided me with a way to protect participants and their responses from hackers with a user registration process that included CAPTCHA technology, where a person has to read slightly distorted text and type the two words in a text box. At this time, computers have great difficulty, but can read distorted text. Typically, hackers find that the time and effort to break CAPTCHAs greatly outweigh the perceived benefit. As a result, CAPTCHA prevents most types of fake comments within the website from advertisement bots and protects user email accounts from falling into the hands of email spammers.

**Participants**

After receiving IRB approval from the University of Houston's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, I solicited participants in-game from the Draenor-US server by contacting in-game acquaintances and guild mates via /whisper (private messages within the game) and private message through the guild's website. I reminded

them I was completing my graduate program with a thesis involving WoW, and I asked them to participate by answering some questions on the website. I summed the questions with, "I want to hear about your World of Warcraft experiences. Tell me your story."

Once participants indicated interest, I directed them to the website to read through the informed consent and register for an account. During account creation, participants were asked to (a) create a username and password, (b) read and digitally agree to the informed consent and ground rules, and (c) answer some very general real-life demographic questions including age, sex, relationship status, education, industry, amount of time they spend with friends and family each week, and whether or not they care for children or older parents. They were also asked some general demographic information about their in-game lives, including how long they have played WoW, faction, race, class, whether they participate in a guild, and how many hours a week they spend online playing WoW.

Of the 20 people I asked to participate, 19 expressed interest, and 17 registered a user account on the website. Of the 17 registrants, 13 completed the interview, but only 6 responded to my follow-up questions. As Table 1 indicates, participants were mostly male (eight), with four females, and one who preferred to not answer the question. The participants who completed the interview fell into three age ranges: 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44. Most participants (seven) identified their relationship status as single, with four participants involved in a relationship, and two as married. Only three of the participants reported to provide care for a child. Great variance existed in the time participants spent with real-life family and friends each week. Ranging from as little as four hours per week to as many as 50 hours per week, the average time spent was roughly 19 hours per week.

**Table 1: Participant Relational Demographics**

|    | Sex         | Age   | Relationship Status | Caregiver Status | Hours/Week  |
|----|-------------|-------|---------------------|------------------|-------------|
| 1  | Female      | 18-24 | Relationship        | No               | 12          |
| 2  | Male        | 18-24 | Married             | No               | 28          |
| 3  | Male        | 25-34 | Single              | No               | 10          |
| 4  | Female      | 25-34 | Single              | No               | 50          |
| 5  | Male        | 25-34 | Single              | Yes – Child      | 15          |
| 6  | Female      | 35-44 | Relationship        | Yes – Child      | 40          |
| 7  | Male        | 25-34 | Single              | No               | 20          |
| 8  | Male        | 18-24 | Single              | No               | 4           |
| 9  | No Response | 18-24 | Single              | No               | 21          |
| 10 | Male        | 18-24 | Single              | No               | 10          |
| 11 | Male        | 25-34 | Married             | No               | 20          |
| 12 | Female      | 18-24 | Relationship        | Yes – Child      | 28          |
| 13 | Male        | 25-34 | Relationship        | No               | No Response |

In terms of the participants' working lives, some interviewees (five) reported full-time employment, while one participant declared part-time employment, another two self-identified as unemployed, and three considered themselves students. Two participants declined to respond. Ten participants reported some experience with college, including two with associate degrees and two with Bachelor's degrees. One participant reported the completion of their high school diploma or equivalent, while two indicated

some high school. The participants reported great diversity in their respective industries, as demonstrated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Participant Employment Demographics**

|    | Education Level | Employment Status | Employment Industry |
|----|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1  | Some College | Unemployed | Childcare |
| 2  | Some College | Full-Time | Retail |
| 3  | Associate Degree | Part-Time | Food Service |
| 4  | Associate Degree | Full-Time | Military – USN |
| 5  | HS Diploma or Equivalent | Full-Time | Electronics Distribution |
| 6  | Some College | No Response | Cellular |
| 7  | Bachelor's Degree | Unemployed | Digital Design & Illustration |
| 8  | Some HS | Full-Time | Retail |
| 9  | Some HS | Student | None |
| 10 | Some College | Student | History |
| 11 | Bachelor's Degree | Full-Time | Software |
| 12 | Some College | Student | Sociology |
| 13 | Some College | No Response | No Response |

The participants also provided basic information regarding their in-game WoW lives. Nine participants demonstrated their veteran status by playing the game for five or more years, and two participants reported playing WoW for three to four years, while the remaining two participants are relatively new to WoW with only one to two years of in-

game experience. Participants overwhelmingly reported their main, or the character that they spend the most time playing in game, as being associated with the Alliance faction and having achieved the maximum level of 85. Perhaps the most interesting data listed in Table 3 are in the last column – hours spent in-game per week. Participants reported spending 10 to a whopping 60 hours per week in-game. However, on average, the participants claimed to spend approximately 27 hours each week in Azeroth.

**Table 3: Participant WoW Demographics**

|    | Years of In-Game Experience | Hours Played per Week |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | 1-2                         | 56                    |
| 2  | 5+                          | 10                    |
| 3  | 5+                          | 20                    |
| 4  | 3-4                         | 30                    |
| 5  | 5+                          | 20                    |
| 6  | 3-4                         | 15                    |
| 7  | 5+                          | 60                    |
| 8  | 5+                          | 16                    |
| 9  | 5+                          | 15                    |
| 10 | 5+                          | 30                    |
| 11 | 5+                          | 30                    |
| 12 | 1-2                         | 21                    |
| 13 | 5+                          | No Response           |

After participants completed the account creation process, I activated their account for entry into the site's interview forum. They received an email confirmation informing them that the account was active and they were now able to complete the online interview.

**Interviews**

The message board's first post served to remind participants of the ground rules and study purpose. It also provided some basic instructions and guidelines for the process, including a link to the Informed Consent for participants to access and review. Following the introductory post, participants could view a thread containing the nondirective questions from the attached interview guide (see Appendix). I asked participants to tell me about (a) their experience with World of Warcraft; (b) their motivations for playing WoW; (c) how the game keeps them engaged; (d) how WoW fits in their daily and/or weekly routines; (e) friend, family, and co-worker responses to their involvement in the game and any subsequent effects on their relationships; and (f) how their real and in-game lives have intersected. As participants posted their thoughts, I replied with a directive question, as necessary, to guide the dialogue.

My collected data consisted of 30 posts from my interactions with 13 participants, totaling 29 single-spaced pages of text for analysis. One participant responded to my directive questions after I had completed the coding, so his second post was not included. I was surprised to find that some prospective participants indicated interest in my project, but did not do more than create an account. I also encountered challenges keeping participants engaged in the dialogue. Despite receiving notification of a reply to their post, many did not respond to my follow-up questions. Others who eventually did reply

took as many as 22 days to respond. Due to impending thesis and graduation deadlines, I

was forced to stop recruiting participants and replying to late-coming posts in order to

proceed with the rest of the thesis. Preliminary data analysis indicated I was beginning to

approach saturation; however, with limited participants and follow-up posts, I did not

have enough data to comfortably claim I had reached saturation.

**Grounded Theory Analysis**

After data collection, I conducted a constructivist method of constant comparison

based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory in which I moved continually

between my collected data for emergent similarities, trends, and significant anomalies

(Charmaz, 2011). I chose this strategy because its inductive approach best enabled me to

answer my research questions through discovery as the interviews were conducted

(Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). Specifically, constructivist grounded theory provided a

complete and solid foundation to apply to the data because it offered an avenue to

acknowledge and use my background with WoW to better understand the participants'

responses in ways that only a fellow WoW player could achieve (Charmaz, 2011;

Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). I especially felt it was important to understand how

participants "construct their lives and why they act the way they do" (Charmaz, 2011, p.

292), and this approach to interpreting the data served as a lens that ultimately made each

participant's story clear.

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) outline in their original grounded theory,

constructivist grounded theory allows a researcher to "fragment the data and thus take

them apart… [and] make comparisons between data" (Charmaz, 2011, p. 294). First, I

openly coded for as many categories as possible from the data, and then I combined the

categories into general themes that specifically addressed my research questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). After further refining my categories, I ended up with 10 categories grouped into four themes, as illustrated in Table 4. The next chapter will detail these themes and corresponding categories with examples taken directly from participant interviews.

**Table 4: Identified Themes and Categories**

| Theme | Category |
| --- | --- |
| Connection | Social |
| | In-Group Belonging |
| Positive Reinforcement | Consistency |
| | Accomplishment |
| Power / Control | Escapism |
| | Addiction |
| Intersection of Real Life and Azeroth | Gateway |
| | Bridging the Distance |
| | Real-Life Reactions and Effects |
| | Commitment |

**Chapter IV**

**RESULTS**

Four general themes emerged from my grounded theory analysis: connection, positive reinforcement, power/control, and the intersection of real life and Azeroth. In this chapter, I detail each of these themes with a discussion of the corresponding categories comprising them. Throughout the chapter, participants are identified by the pseudonyms they chose during the account creation process. While many participants elected to use the names of their in-game avatars, others did not.

**Connection**

The first theme that immediately stood out amongst the collected data was the idea of connection. Throughout the interviews, participants consistently referred to WoW as a forum or environment to feel connected to others, including real-life friends and relatives. In particular, the participants spoke about connection as social activity and in-group belonging.

*Social*

Within the idea of connection, almost all of the participants expressed a desire for social activity. The participants mentioned the words "friendship" or "friends" numerous times when detailing their experiences with WoW, why they play, or what keeps them engaged in the game.

Real-life friends introduced many of the respondents to the game. For example, Xarenaal was introduced to a different MMORPG, GuildWars, by his "buddy [who] one day came at [him] with this game World of Warcraft." Rose9151982 was also introduced

to the game through real-life "friends [that] had been playing wow and left me with a trial account that I laughed at and only gave a try out of sheer boredom and sadly loneliness. And then I was hooked!" Similarly, Panda decided to try WoW when she "found out that several of my friends had been playing and started to gain a bit of interest." Kat "started playing after my ex begged me to play…" Later, she stated that she has "made some great friends" in WoW. Sanitycrusher also had a similar experience when he "started playing…at the request of [his] girlfriend." He then confessed to spending "nearly 300 days in game with family and friends on over ten different characters." Ashie, Blakkheim, Ajax, and Krogansmash also learned about the game from real-life friends or significant others.

Many of the participants came to the game through real-life friends and significant others, but they continued to play WoW, in part, because of the connection to new in-game friends. After playing the game with only a few real-life buddies, Krogansmash stated that he "never played in a guild until Cata[clysm] and it is a very different play experience. Much more social and a lot more fun than playing with one or two friends." Tenaril stated that he enjoys "the social environment," especially since:

> I'm a socially awkward person in real life, but here, here this is my turf, my
> zone. My comfort area. I play to earn things that in actuality, have no meaning or
> bearing on life, but give me something to work towards anyway. I play for my
> friends. My online friendships mean just as much as real life, sometimes more in a
> few special cases.

Comparable to Tenaril's strong feelings, Aniaran affirmed that "World of Warcraft has been probably the predominant social activity I've participated in for the last six years."

Nyarlathotep, who plays WoW for about 10 hours each week, stated, "In terms of social activity…[i]t saddens me that I can't commit as much time to raiding as I once could." These statements illustrate the social needs that WoW fulfills. Whether players started the game with real-life friends or entered Azeroth to squelch feelings of loneliness, feelings of interconnectedness remain at the heart of each participant's experience.

### In-Group Belonging

In addition to serving as a social backdrop, participants provided many examples of how WoW serves as an in-group to provide players with a dimension of belonging. Tenaril, for example, believes WoW provides him with a comfortable place of acceptance where he feels free to be himself – "my turf, my zone." Nyarlathotep also demonstrated the importance of in-group belonging when he stated, "I went through a lot of server transfers and guild changing in those days, trying to find just the right fit." His admission reveals an arduous and potentially costly quest, not only in terms of time and energy but also money. Blizzard charges $25.00 each time a player wishes to relocate a character to a different server.

The experience of changing guilds can vary depending on what qualities a player desires in a guild. Some guilds are open, where anyone can join by simply asking for an invitation. However, most of the highly coveted guilds have a rigorous process for membership. Many high-end guilds require prospective members to meet certain gear, availability, and achievement criteria. For example, recruits may be required to have experienced or even completed a certain amount of raid content, which can be verified through Blizzard's WoW Armory website (www.wowarmory.com). Typically, progression-based raiding guilds require that a potential member read some general

information that includes general behavior policies, availability requirements, and loot rules. If, after reading the guild's policies, the person is still interested, he or she must complete an online application. Applications usually ask questions that will allow them to estimate a person's skill at playing their character and get a feel for their personality. If an application is approved, sometimes a voice interview is required over a chat client. Assuming the applicant passes these tests, he or she is offered an opportunity to trial. Trial periods allow both the player and guild to get to know each other and see if everyone's expectations are being met. Trials can last a week or up to a month, depending on the guild. If a trial goes well for both sides, the member's guild rank is adjusted to the appropriate rank. If the trial goes poorly, typically the applicant is let loose to search for another guild.

The pursuit of finding a guild that one can call home can be quite arduous. Despite the challenges players may face in the process, many deem it worthwhile. Nyarlathotep said that WoW allowed him to "coordinate [his] efforts with others in a meaningful way…something that makes sense and is fun to all participating." It helps him feel a part of something bigger than himself. Another participant, Sanitycrusher, displayed his in-faction pride in the title of his interview post – "Lok'tar Ogar!" This phrase is a Horde war cry in the Orcish language meaning "Victory or Death." When players type "/cheer" in-game while logged in as an Orc character, their avatar will chant the war cry.

Aniaran provided another example of in-group belonging when he discussed his experience with BlizzCon:

Some of the friends I met over WoW all decided that we should attend Blizzcon a few years back and a group of 15 guild-mates all got together for a week in California to hang out, attend Blizzcon, and all just get to know each other in real life after spending 50+ hours a week together in game.

Not only does WoW offer a virtual meeting space for players, the annual convention provides the added experience of real life to an environment that is seemingly a very real microcosm of life. Rose9151982 purchased WoW-inspired clothing, including an "epic purple shirt" and "mage icon shirt." She went on to discuss how wearing the shirts in public encourages other WoW players to strike up conversations about the game in everyday places like the grocery store. "They're kind of like a secret hand shake," explained Rose9151982. Like wearing a sports team's jersey or placing a university alumni sticker on one's car, the WoW shirts are a symbol of pride that identify the wearer as part of the WoW community.

Aniaran provided another insight to in-group belonging in his interview when he discussed PvPing in vanilla, before any of the game's expansion packs. Aniaran described the activity as "hundreds of people descending upon Southshore to stick it to those dirty Horde in Tarren Mill. I vividly recall staying up for a full day once just to make sure that they wouldn't push us back into Southshore." His statement is indicative of the 'us versus them' theme set in motion when the game was first released in 2004. Although the storyline within the game has united the Alliance and Horde against a common foe for two expansions, obvious divisions between the two factions persist.

**Positive Reinforcement**

Second, the participants' interviews consistently demonstrate the positive impact the game has had on them as individuals. WoW helped some participants build their confidence and feel safe being themselves despite feeling socially challenged in real life. Others simply described feelings of "satisfaction," being a part of something bigger than themselves, and finding pleasure in "seeing how the story unfolds." Khaste described feeling "proud" of the guild he "started from nothing and cleared the end content of the [Wrath of the Lich King] expansion. Aniaran explained, "WoW has influenced me outside of the game too in my artwork and creative work, which also may be another reason why it has such a strong hold on me." Other constructs comprising the theme of positive reinforcement include consistency and accomplishment.

*Consistency*

The participants underscored the importance of WoW as a mainstay in their lives. Whether through lonely holidays, social awkwardness, or as affordable entertainment, all participants recounted WoW experiences with fond references. One particularly clear example came from Nyarlathotep, who wrote, "At this point, it's a familiar entity in my life, and having that consistency is rather valuable to me as a person." Later in his interview, he reiterated this point with, "It's consistently there if I want to play it. In a situation where everything is changing quickly, that can be quite helpful."

Rose9151982 expressed her desire to bring a piece of her Azerothian life as Sunny, her mage, into her real-life work environment. As she explained:

> [She would like a] bust of [her] mage built to keep on [her] desk at work but just
> haven't found one [she] like[s]. [She] may get one of those small pictures made

up with Sunny in some Azorathian [sic] setting on the background to pin up on

the wall of my cubical at work someday.

Rose9151982's statement clearly indicates that she associates positive feelings with

WoW and her experiences as Sunny by wanting to carry those sentiments into her real-

life work environment.

Another example of the value of consistency came from Tenaril when he

discussed his in-game experience: "I generally enjoy my time, and I always feel secure in

the idea that WoW is a constant game I can always look back to. Like a safety net of

sorts." Ajax enjoys a sense of consistency in that WoW is always evolving. The

multitude of ways to play the game coupled with routinely updated and added content

always provides him with something to do. He claimed his parents did not understand

that "the game could not be paused and that there wasn't a way to beat the game."

Indeed, the environment is dependent on players interacting with each other for the

purposes of grouping together to battle each other or a common foe or for the buying and

selling of trade goods as opposed to games with simple unscripted non-player characters

(NPCs).

*Accomplishment*

In addition to the positive feelings of safety and comfort that come from

consistency, the participants also play WoW for the feeling of "achievement."

Blakkheim, a guild master and raid leader of an eight-hour-per-week raiding guild,

reported that he "usually feel[s] somewhat successful" when he raids. "It's very

rewarding leading a group of 10+ people through a series of challenges, and working out

puzzles involved in handling various encounters," said Blakkheim. Later, he commented

on the success of his team: "We manage to overcome a load of difficult encounters in the short amount of time we have to dedicate to it each week." Most end-game raiding guilds on the Draenor-US server raid at least three days a week for four hours at a time.

Similarly, Nyarlathotep plays WoW because "[t]he feeling of learning a raid boss for the first time, be it with 9 or 24 other people, is a really good feeling. It gives me a sense of accomplishment." He not only reaps the satisfaction of accomplishment during in-game activities, but also acknowledged how the game has positively impacted him as a person in real life:

> [WoW has] made me more considerate of other people. When you think about it, most people in WoW aren't the pleasant sort, due to internet anonymity. Now, I see those people and tell myself 'I don't wanna be quite like that.' So, I try my best to not be a complete asshole, both in game, and out of game.

Other participants commented that they "love conquering something unbeatable," "seeing big DPS numbers fly," and "really enjoy figuring [healing] out on new fights," as well as feeling "accomplished" that they "conquered" a raid, achievement, rank, or level. Tenaril continues playing the game because of "the persistence, the game. Mechanics I find enjoyable, thought of seriously progressing, and mastering the World of Warcraft." Once players reach an understanding of how the game works their level of involvement due to the vast options of game play and interaction with, as Panda put it, "live people, playing at home," demonstrates how positive feelings of consistency and accomplishment arise from WoW game play.

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**Power / Control**

Power and control comprise the third theme that emerged from the participants'
interviews. Some gamers use WoW to escape social awkwardness, while others find it a
door to an inspiring kind of freedom typically only read about or experienced in movies.
Overall, players claim the power they experience in-game – socially and novel abilities
through one's in-game character – to be a key reason for their continued game play. At
times, the power that players experience from this type of escapism can foster a level of
dependency required to maintain positive feelings of adventure and novel powers, which
leads to the second category in this theme – addiction.

*Escapism*

Many participants indicated that logging into the game serves as a means of
escape from real life. For example, game play triggered Rose9151982's "competitive
spirit [to] kick in" and provided her the opportunity to choose to "play in silence…and
that would be fine" or have "the freedom to chat without concern." Entering Azeroth
allows players to experience "epic adventure" while "being able to fly around a fully 3
dimensional world." Kat mentioned that she "like[s] having abilities to do things [she
has] always wanted to do in real life, but obviously can't. Having magical abilities in a
fantasy world with dragons and elves is alluring." Sanitycrusher similarly stated that
WoW "holds my attention with dozens of possible ways to spend [my] time in game."

While some players escape for excitement and adventure, others seek refuge so
they can "wind down." As an MMORPG, WoW enables players to not only escape the
drama of real life, but it also provides players with a veil of anonymity, making it a safe
place for players to be themselves. If things in-game take a turn for the worst, a player

can retreat by simply logging out. Rose9151982 captured the freedom experienced in-game when she wrote, "I'm not being judged on my looks, my clothes, my age, or my mannerisms but am instead judge[d] purely on my own opinions, advice I may give, and skill at the game."

### Addiction

The underlying theme of power and control also presented with subtle references to WoW addiction. Many small benign quips like "sucked in" and "hooked" mildly alluded to potential control issues that often popped up in participants' interviews. One of the most striking statements came from Xarenaal: "At this point, it has become something of a norm, I've been at it so long I find it hard to completely stop now." He further elaborated that he has "a lot of time invested in it, and [he] feel[s] it would be wasteful to stop at this point." Similarly, Aniaran shared that he stayed "up for a full day once" playing WoW. Later, he acknowledged that "there's just something deep down in myself that [I] can't really resist."

Nyarlathotep opened his interview by claiming to be an "altaholic," or someone who creates multiple characters, up to 10 per server, and actively works on leveling up each of them. Most "altaholics" have several characters that have reached maximum level. I would estimate that it would take roughly 72 hours, at a minimum, to level a character from one to 85. Sanitycrusher explained his continued interest in WoW with "three simple words: obsessive compulsive disorder." He elaborated, "I can't stand to let more content be released without fully exploring it."

Overall, it seems that the players were aware of the addictive, unending nature of WoW. Though most participants indicated some higher level of commitment that borders

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obligation and may have relatively minor effects on their real lives, participants reported

having an overall feeling of control and balance in their lives. Generally, they did not

believe their gaming habits were out of control. Despite their positive outlook on this

issue, however, many small comments did reference a sense of obligation or inability to

quit.

The participants' interviews did not report or indicate that any of them have a

serious addiction that has severely and negatively impacted their lives. As an insider, they

see WoW as just another hobby. Instead of watching TV, building model radio-controlled

planes or cars, or reading books, they choose to be engaged in Azeroth. Although they are

aware of individuals who have not experienced the game and may view WoW and other

MMORPGs as a bottomless abyss, they see no problems with their engagement in game.

In short, this particular group of gamers did not have any serious addiction problems.

**Intersection of Real Life and Life in Azeroth**

Fourth, the participants overwhelmingly stated that WoW has had a positive effect

on bringing friends closer together emotionally as well as "physically" through

interactivity in Azeroth. Their reported interactions in real life about in-game life, as well

as their reactions to those experiences, offer great insight into the players' continued

interest in the game, feelings of commitment and obligation, and the ways in which real

life and life in Azeroth intersect.

*Gateway*

Real-life friends, significant others, or family members introduced nearly all of

the participants to WoW. According to Rose9151982, her "experience with World of

Warcraft started over Christmas in 2008…when I was stuck working…over the holiday

while all my friends went home to their families and I was left alone with my family being over 300 miles away." Through discussions of in-game experiences, goals, updates, and knowledge, the real-world relationships that bring real-life friends into the game provide the inertia for the players' continued interest in the game. "Outside of the game, I generally have discussions with my wife, sometimes my brother-in-law," wrote Nyarltahotep. Other respondents transitioned to WoW from other games, including role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons. Aniaran said, "We made the transition from real life roleplaying with DnD to WoW as a group, and it was probably the biggest reason I still play this game today."

Sanitycrusher began "playing World of Warcraft at the request of [his] girlfriend who didn't like [his] favored online game at the time, Everquest 2." Similarly, Ashie "started playing [in] October of 2008 when my then new boyfriend kept urging me to try it. I didn't really have any interest in it as I never really played video games before, but I ended up really liking it." The game has helped Sanitycrusher's relationship, with his now ex-girlfriend, come full circle. He stated that "the friendship…developed in game is a large part of why we remain amicable."

Other players' real lives, as individuals, have been affected by their in-game friendships, too. Rose9151982, who normally could be found curled up with a good book or playing a video game, discovered that her real and in-game worlds frequently intersect:

Somehow I have gotten out to see live cover-bands (because a guildie was playing in town), meeting more people in person and not just in the game (guildies that live close by or [are] traveling through my area), and I've gotten more ideas of

things to do in my free time (like buying a bicycle and going to the trails in my

local state) based on in game conversations.

Sanitycrusher, whose interest in WoW was bolstered by the interactive game play,

claimed, "Grouping for in game events and quests is a lot of fun and provided a closer

connection than watching tv."

Many participants also discussed bringing their adventures in Azeroth to real life

by either recounting previous experiences with meeting in-game friends in real life or by

expressing interest in doing so in the future. Two participants have even been involved in

a romantic relationship that was initiated in WoW and eventually transitioned to real life.

Kat wrote, "I've actually met a couple of people for lunch that were guilded with me, and

I also met someone romantically, too." Other participants have met in-game friends at

BlizzCon and occasionally travel to visit one another as well.

Although many examples of the ways in which Azerothian life affects real life are

positive, Aniaran provided a specific example of how the game can negatively impact a

relationship. "I've had a co-worker who played, but was horde, and the relationship was

eventually devolved to mutual dislike for each other over the course of 6 months of

employment."

### Bridging the Distance

In addition to providing impetus for small transitions in their lives, whether it be

within shared perspectives or a shift as individuals, the game also serves as a way for

players to maintain friendships despite great physical distance. It's as simple as "playing

with online and faraway [real life] friends" and "[b]eing able to hangout and do things

with friends online even when the weather is terrible, or you're sick, or you're 5,000

miles away from each other is one of the greatest things in the world." WoW provides a forum to be involved in other people's lives and not let life hindrances such as distance or illness get in the way. As a member of the U.S. Navy, Rose9151982 has found WoW "to be a great way to keep in touch with the friends I've made across the country who also play Blizzard games!" Other players whose friendships started in game have "made numerous trips around the country since then to hang out with my friends," transitioning online friendships to the real world.

WoW has also helped romantic couples stay connected despite long distances. Blakkheim wrote, "While my wife was in graduate school, we played the game together as a way of spending time together even though we were separated by a great distance." The game has also served as a place to rekindle old friendships. Ashie "was facebook friends with a childhood friend that [she'd] fallen out of touch with and…noticed she had posted something about WoW. I sent her a message and we began playing together and talking a lot." In short, WoW provides an opportunity for a player to increase the depth and breadth of one's friendships, at times providing the vital link of shared experience, that helps involve both parties in a relationship.

### Real-Life Reactions and Effects

Overall, friends were mainly tolerant, if not completely understanding, of the participants' game play, largely due to their own involvement with WoW. "Most of my friends share my passion for the game," said Tenrail. "It's a large community, and we're everywhere." Some of Nyarlathotep's friends "play Wow, while others keep their opinion to themselves about it. I know those aren't too thrilled about me playing the game, but whatever." Xarenaal shares that "some don't like the idea of having to make payments to

play a game, and others simply hate the fact that your actions in the game basically have no real effect on the world or the game." On a related note, Blakkheim described a few of his friends' hesitation to play the game: "fellow gamers will not touch the game because they feel that it 'has no end,' and therefore no real objective."

Family members, on the other hand, reportedly experience more of a disconnect with the participants' interest in the game. The participants claims their family responses range from neutral, where WoW is treated like any other hobby, to negative, as if WoW were problematic. Participants typically dealt with these responses by framing them in the context of computer illiteracy or simple inexperience. "Most of my mother's side of the family doesn't come from a very tech-savvy upbringing. So, spending a lot of time on a computer game to them is basically a waste of time," explained Nyarlathotep. "I pretty much ignored them, or challenged them to try it out, since they passed judgement [sic] on something without ever trying it." Later, he reiterated that his "wife is an avid WoW player, me having introduced her to it. My family has always been a little scornful of the habit, but some of them have since started playing it."

Aniaran also shared his experience with family members disapproving of his WoW gaming habits:

> As for my family, they all hate it. With a passion that probably will go unmatched for a long time. My parents don't understand how I can spend so much time in front of a computer when my chosen profession involves hours and hours of computer time. My siblings don't care for the game because they think I need to be out trolling bars and doing things that don't revolve around 'that game'. The biggest drag for my family is by far and above my parents. They think that since

I'm 26 years old I should be out looking for a wife, buying a house, and having

kids. WoW is a cockblock as far as they're concerned.

It appears that his parents have a concern for delayed maturation into culturally expected

life events.

Other participants report that their families are "tolerant" and cause them "grief"

at times. Rose9151982 offered another more detailed example when she alluded to her

feelings of familial disapproval with undertones of anxiety:

Due to family not living near me and none of them playing they don't really

understand the game nor do they realize just how many hours I put into the game

on a weekly basis. I did recently find out that one of my cousin's [sic] has been

playing since vanilla! Only because my mother heard his wife complaining about

how much he plays and I have no[w] inadvertently become a reason to continue

playing…'But now I can see how she's doing anytime we're both on!'…If she

[Mom] understood the game and the interactions between people I don't believe

she would have an issue with me playing it. Because then I would be

socializing...when I first started playing WOW she didn't like that I was playing

'those games' (I use to play PS2, PS3, and Nintendo RPG games all the time and

she blames them for my not completing college).

Ashie had a less heated experience with her family and WoW. She didn't "think that

anyone cares" that she plays WoW, but wished that her "brother and dad would try

playing it." She thought they would enjoy the game play, but "neither of them seem to be

interested in giving it a chance."

Some participants stated they will defend WoW to family and friends who discourage game play or, as Rose9151982 claimed, "really don't understand the game nor do they realize just how many hours I put into the game on a weekly basis." Krogansmash suggested that his family "likes to conjure up statistics" about "social stereotypes" they get from the media, which "can skew statistics." After a negative experience with a romantic interest initiated in WoW, Anaiaran concluded that "one bad apple does not make a bad tree." He argued that the good experiences he has had with the game and those who play it greatly outweigh the bad.

Another bridge between WoW and real-life experiences is evident in the mixed reaction to WoW gamers in the working world. Tenaril has "had two bosses who…openly stated that they hated the game, and that I was not to bring any inclination of the game into my work life, or even my personal life while I was at work around them." Unlike Tenaril, some participants' experience in discussing WoW with colleagues has resulted in a warm experience. Sanitycrusher recalls a positive experience when he "gush[ed] to coworkers or [his] boss about recent accomplishment[s] in game. My boss has shown interest in the past at playing himself to improve the relationship he has with his son who recently graduated college and is now living overseas." An even more extreme acceptance of WoW among associates occurred at Rose9151982's workplace:

> I happen to work in an environment where it is not uncommon to hear a LARPing [live action role playing] conversation in the chow-hall or see a D & D game being played next to a guys and gals knitting club. My playing a MMO seems to be on par for where I work and in fact an old guild of mine used to be made of people I worked with till we all moved and they lost interest.

*Commitment*

Ultimately, the participants' responses reveal their commitment – to the game, their guild mates, and the (perhaps surprising) acknowledgement that real life is more important than WoW. Many of the participants make relatively minor accommodations in their real lives to be able to honor in-game commitments. Rose9151982's description of the ways she fits WoW into her weekly routines displayed an interesting struggle with her real and in-game lives:

> I definitely will schedule my activities around my raid times; however, if someone spontaneously wants to go out and do something I can call my Guild leader and say 'I'm not coming'. That's the joy of being one of many mages in a guild made of RL friends and friends of friends. Life > wow. Although, I suppose if I had a role where people depended on me I would be a little more hesitant to go out…just because I'm the type that doesn't like to let others down.

Rather than try to contact guild mates and ensure raid coverage to participate in real-life events or activities, Kat "typically will not make plans during the week, but save[s her] weekends for social times, and during the week for raiding." Similarly, Blakkheim tries to plan around his guild's raid night schedule: "two nights a week I try not to schedule anything else to do."

In addition to scheduling, Tenaril recognizes his ties to the game when he stated, "I honestly don't know what I would have done with all of this time if WoW wasn't around." Some participants demonstrated commitment through their role as part of a "leadership" team or "guild leader," while others more simply stated that "WoW is just a part of every day [sic] life for [them] at this point."

The level of dedication exhibited by the participants is clear. They schedule real-life activities around their in-game responsibilities. When faced with conflicts between the two worlds, the solution is not always easy. Still, the participants generally agree that important people, events, and things in their real lives trump WoW. As Rose9151982 stated by referencing the popular in-game phrase: life >WoW.

**Chapter V**

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

As stated in Chapter I, my purpose in this thesis is to gain an understanding of community, social needs, and interpersonal communication from the gamer's perspective. While control over one's in-game presence and interpersonal relationships, coupled with the sense of belonging obtained by participating in online gaming, contributes to why players keep logging back into the game, researchers have focused on the possibility of gaming addiction and have started identifying characteristics that may be indicative of problematic behavior, as well as possible physiological conditions that may result from gaming behaviors. Indeed, to this point, societal concern and research primarily addresses the non-gamer point of view by speaking to the effects of gaming addiction – physically, psychologically, and socially. Although my findings represent the lived experiences of a select few and cannot be generalized to other individuals or populations, they nonetheless offer a multifaceted – and overwhelmingly positive – understanding of the relationship between WoW players and the concepts of social needs, interpersonal relationships, and community from the player's perspective. In this chapter, I summarize the results relevant to both research questions and offer suggestions for future research in this area.

**Research Question 1: What social needs does WoW fulfill?**

The 13 interviews collected were overwhelmingly positive. Given my own biases, I was quite surprised that participants didn't have anything negative to say about the game or its effect on their lives. After carefully studying the interviews, three themes related to social needs emerged: connection, positive reinforcement, and power/control.

The results show that the participants play to be involved with others, set goals and accomplish them, and be free to experience and interact in a fantastical world where players can enact, to some degree, what was previously only accessible as a passenger or third-party viewer through books, comic books, and movies. They play to feel part of something larger than themselves. WoW provides players a place to be themselves and socialize with real-life friends while expanding their networks to include people they meet in game. The game, as a place of common experience and interest, is an important feature to many of the players' lives by creating an "in-group" culture where players can identify through common gaming phrases like "Lok'tar Ogar" and clothing emblazoned with in-game references.

In addition to connection, the participants consistently mentioned the positive reinforcement they receive from WoW. Many reported the game to be a constant they could depend on when everything else in their lives was changing. It provides players with a way to choose a path by accomplishing certain in-game goals. For example, some players find it rewarding to group with others to learn how to defeat raid bosses, while others work on achievements that can be conquered as an individual. Importantly, participants enjoy the game. They enjoy socializing and working together with their real-life and in-game friends. From relaxation to satisfaction and from persistence to feeling great when several attempts at defeating a boss culminates in success, the participants see WoW as more than just a game. The magical abilities, settings, and creatures with pop-culture references continually hold the participants' attention, and the game captures their imaginations in an environment amped-up with a super hero version of society.

Ultimately, WoW provides an experience that participants recall with strong feelings and that even begins to influence their real lives.

Finally, the participant interviews demonstrate the importance of power and control. Participants reported enjoying a world that surpasses the bounds of reality and provided them with an opportunity to be themselves. WoW is an easily accessible vacation and inexpensive departure from stressors, rules, or even "those really boring days." The players also enjoy taking on different roles in the game. Rather than the plethora of assumptions and preconceived judgments that individuals typically encounter in real life, WoW players are judged on their skill, strategy, and in-game achievements. If at any point the game becomes boring or no longer fun, players can simply suspend or terminate their account.

Any discussion of power must also consider the darker side of control. In the case of this project and WoW, that darker side is addiction. This topic came up in a light-hearted manner throughout data collection. Some participants seemed to be in control of their gaming, while a couple others seemed dependent on it, almost as if it were a crutch. Overall, however, the participants appeared to enjoy WoW as a hobby that does not negatively affect their real lives.

In a perceived climate of largely negative coverage of WoW and gaming by the media, lack of understanding from non-gamers, and a few negative game-related experiences, the participants defended the game. They viewed the negative outlook on gaming as more of a disconnect or lack of understanding. Like all things in life, moderation is important. The participants claimed that there will always be extreme cases of gaming addiction, with awful repercussions, but most gamers don't fall into that

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category. Furthermore, those few extreme cases may have had control issues with some other sort of addiction if it weren't gaming.

**Research Question 2: How do players' in-game and real lives intersect and influence one another?**

The participants reported a great deal of intersection between their real and in-game lives with overwhelmingly positive effects punctuated by a few instances of minor negativity. Friends introduced almost all of the participants to WoW. Some simply changed computer games, while others evolved from real-life role-playing games to the MMORPG. Several used the game as a means to maintain or rekindle real-life friendships and familial relationships that had been affected by distance. Many participants also described meeting in-game friends in real life at local concerts, conventions, or for lunch. Similarly, some romantic relationships have been initiated and sustained in-game. The participants also valued being exposed to a greater variety of people from around the world because of WoW.

The interviews also demonstrated that the participants are committed to their factions, guilds, and even the game as a whole. The participants schedule real-life activities around their in-game commitments, such as raiding, and participate not only in organized in-game group activities but also in leadership roles to coordinate their guilds' efforts. Some players even reported taking a brief hiatus from the game, only to return a few months later. On the other hand, some mentioned having to scale back their in-game time due to real-life commitments, even though they wished they had more time to spend in-game.

A disconnect often exists between those who do and those who do not play WoW. A few participants have close friends who refuse to play the game because of its never-ending nature or lack of overall objective. Other deterrents include having to pay for the software and a subscription or the belief that player actions have no real effect on the environment. Despite these specific reasons for not playing WoW they still understand the appeal of playing games and support their friends' WoW participation.

Most participants stated that parents are often a source of disconnect and disapproval about their WoW involvement. Parental opinions ranged from "scornful," "hate it," to "don't care." Some participants explain this as inexperience with the game and not being "tech savvy." One participant shared that his parents think the game is keeping him from fulfilling their expectations, namely that he should be seeking a wife, buying a house, and having children.

On the other hand, reactions from colleagues demonstrated a great degree of variance. Some participants were able to bond with their coworkers over the game, some were quickly and sharply shut down at any mention of the game, and others found their interest in WoW complemented their coworkers' interests.

After reading various stories in the media, I was thankfully surprised to discover that WoW has not had some sort of catastrophic effect on any of the participants' relationships or lives. Instead, in many ways, WoW has enriched their lives. The participants have made new friends, bolstered their self-esteem by conquering difficult encounters in-game, and fulfilled leadership roles necessary to keep their guilds functioning. As a relatively inexpensive form of entertainment during challenging

economic times, WoW has provided people with an environment where they can join their friends for an epic adventure.

In comparison to the research cited in the literature review my results demonstrated an overall positivity towards gaming and its role in participants' lives. It seems that the media has largely painted a negatively tinged portrait of a black and white world of gaming – addicts and nongamers. Instead, there are many shades of grey. This stereotype of dysfunctional, game addicted geeks is not consistent with my findings. It's easy to believe the negative media reports if one hasn't experienced an MMORPG first hand.

Many of the participants in this study play enough hours to equal or supersede that of a part-time job. During this time players engage not only in the mental and physical labor of learning boss fights, practicing spell/skill rotation, and preparing in-game equipment to achieve certain goals, but they also engage in emotional labor. The in-game interaction with guild mates, raiding teams, and shared experiences provide players opportunities to become better interpersonal communicators, leaders, and problem solvers. Despite the working world and society's overall negative outlook on the effects of gaming, these are transferable skills that can carry across to life outside of Azeroth, including work and personal settings, alike.

It's important to note that the gaming genre of MMORPGs is rather unique. The game never truly ends. As a microcosm of our world, there are always new foes to conquer, battles to prepare for, and challenges to tackle. Though, it's true that there will always be a few people who reside at the extremes of a spectrum - in this case, game

addicts.  However, my findings suggest that unlike the media's reports, overall most gamers exist in the shades of grey, balancing their real lives with gaming pretty well.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Before I began data collection, I expected to find evidence of WoW's negative impact on people, relationships, and their careers. I found exactly the opposite. More research on a larger scale is needed to see whether these findings hold true with other gamers. Also, conducting the interviews over live chat or voice chat would also provide some more interesting results. I believe that participants would be more likely to divulge more examples and engage in more casual conversation about the game. The interviews conducted in this project felt more formal and succinct than I had anticipated.

Not only more research would be helpful, but a longitudinal study would prove interesting, particularly one that incorporates periodical interviews with participants to understand how they evolve as players. An in-depth analysis of WoW's forums for key topics, like relationships, work, or family, would also provide further insight. Furthermore, to gain a more comprehensive picture of gamers and the effects of WoW, it would be interesting to interview family members and spouses about their perspectives of their loved one's involvement with the game. What changes, if any, have been observed before, during, and post WoW play? Additionally, it would be exciting to interview WoW players who have quit the game. Research that investigates the possibility of a correlation between in-game addictive behaviors with other addictive tendencies in players' real lives would also be interesting.

Much research has been conducted concerning gaming and its effects, but little of this research focuses on the gamers' experiences and stories. Perhaps as those on the

outside gain an understanding of the gaming world, more people will utilize gaming in a positive real-life way, whether to strengthen leadership skills, engage in problem solving, or constitute supportive communities. It is my hope that future research in this field continues to detail the benefits of gaming and eventually help the media and society take a less polarized view of gamers and non-gamers.

**My XP (experience) – continued**

This project has been a roller coaster ride for me. Initially, I was enamored with the game and wanted to know more about why it is so engrossing to so many people. Having experienced periods of intense interest in the game that eventually began to negatively affect my real life, I was determined to understand what makes the game so powerful to have such a profound effect on the person I am. Today, the answer is clear. Me.

I still play WoW occasionally, to run a daily dungeon, say hello to my guild mates, or see what new holiday-themed shenanigans have been placed in Azeroth. At this time, I have stepped away from my position on the raid team. I may return when a spot on the raid team opens up, but I'm not sure. This experience has brought me a new appreciation and awareness for World of Warcraft and the people who make the game so special for me. As with everything in life, the key is balance. I no longer have such a large chunk of my self-value as Kyraen. She is still part of me; I take pride in my role as a healer in one of the top raiding guilds on the Draenor-US server. However, with blinders removed, I have a greater appreciation for the things in life I had let slip off into the distance – friends, hobbies, and life unplugged. Real life > WoW.

# APPENDIX

## UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

COMMITTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

February 24, 2011

Ms. Sarah Tidwell
c/o Dr. Jill Yamasaki
Hotel and Restaurant Management

Dear Ms. Tidwell:

The University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (2) reviewed your research proposal entitled "The WoW Factor: An Investigation of social Needs, Community, and Addiction in World of Warcraft" on February 11, 2011, according to institutional guidelines.

At that time, your project was granted approval contingent upon your agreement to modify your proposal protocol as stipulated by the Committee. The changes you have made adequately respond to those contingencies made by the Committee, and your project has been approved. However reapplication will be required:

1. Annually
2. Prior to any change in the approved protocol
3. Upon development of the unexpected problems or unusual complications

Thus, if you will be still collecting data under this project on **February 1, 2012** you must reapply to this Committee for approval before this date if you wish to prevent an interruption of your data collection procedures.

If you have any questions, please contact Alicia Vargas at (713) 743-9215.

Sincerely yours,

Enrique Valdy
for

Dr. Rebecca Storey, Chair
Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (2)

PLEASE NOTE: (1) All subjects must receive a copy of the informed consent document. If you are using a consent document that requires subject signatures, remember that signed copies must be retained for a minimum of 3 years, or 5 years for externally supported projects. Signed consents from student projects will be retained by the faculty sponsor. Faculty are responsible for retaining signed consents for their own projects; however, if the faculty leaves the university, access must be possible for UH in the event of an agency audit. (2) Research investigators will promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects and others.

Protocol Number: 11246-02          Full Review_____          Expedited Review__X__

Learning. Leading.™     316 E Cullen Building   ·   Houston, TX 77204-2015   ·   713/743-9204   ·   Fax: 713/743-9227

February 16, 2011


Dear Prospective Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research project, The WoW Factor: An investigation of social needs, interpersonal communication, and community in World of Warcraft as it relates to addiction, conducted by Sarah Tidwell from the Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston. This project is part of a Master's degree thesis being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jill Yamasaki, Assistant Professor.

The purpose of this project is to understand (a) what social need(s) World of Warcraft fulfills (b) how World of Warcraft fulfills those social needs and builds community (c) how World of Warcraft affects real-world interpersonal relationships and (d) how gaming addiction relates to World of Warcraft.

You will be one of approximately 20 participants to be asked to participate in this project. If you agree, you will be asked to discuss your experiences with World of Warcraft on a message board/forum setting. It is expected that it will take no longer than approximately 45 minutes to answer the questions.

If you choose to participate, please remember that your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any question.

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. Each participant's name will be paired with a code number by the principal investigator. This code number will appear on all written materials. The list pairing the participant's name to the assigned code number will be kept separate from all research materials and will be available only to the principal investigator. Confidentiality will be maintained within legal limits.

The results of this study may be published in professional and/or scientific journals. It may also be used for educational purposes or for professional presentations. However, no individual participant will be identified.

While you will not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help investigators better understand players' needs that World of Warcraft fulfills and its effects on players' relationships. You should also be advised that there are no foreseeable risks to your participation.

Participation in this project is voluntary and the only alternative to this project is non-participation.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**
1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.
2. All procedures have been explained to me and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me.
4. Any benefits have been explained to me.
5. I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact Sarah Tidwell at sjtidwell@uh.edu. I may also contact Dr. Jill Yamasaki, faculty sponsor at 713-743-3631 or jyamasaki@uh.edu.
6. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.
7. Any questions regarding my rights as a research participant may be addressed to the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Participants (713-743-9204). All research projects that are carried out by investigators at the University of Houston are governed by requirements of the University and the federal government.
8. All information that is obtained in connection with this project and that can be identified with me will remain confidential as far as possible within legal limits. Information gained from this study that can be identified with me may be released to no one other than the principal investigator and Dr. Jill Yamasaki, faculty sponsor. The results may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations without identifying me by name.

**Your participation in this study signifies that you have read and understood the contents of this consent letter and give your consent to participate in this study. If you have any questions about any aspect of this study, please contact the researcher or faculty advisor. Please print or save a copy of this document for your records and future reference**.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sarah Tidwell
sjtidwell@uh.edu

# Interview Guide

**Introduction**
Thank you for participating in this interview. I expect it to take approximately 45 minutes, depending on your answers. I appreciate the time and energy each of you is willing to spare to assist in research in Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). As you will recall from the Informed Consent presented to you during the account creation process, you are welcome to "pass" on responding to a question or cease participation at any time. If you have questions or concerns at any time, please contact me at sarahtidwell@gmail.com.

As you know from being recruited in-game, I play a somewhat accomplished level 85 Night Elf Priest and participate in a 10-man raiding guild, <Infinite Order>. I've been playing WoW since the beta in 2004. It is my hope that the questions below will provide me with insight as to what keeps us coming back to the game. Why do we spend hours earning achievements, collecting mounts, and learning complicated fight strategies? It's fun, but what does that mean? My goal is to gain an understanding of how we become hooked on World of Warcraft.

1. Describe your experience with World of Warcraft.

2. Why do you play World of Warcraft?
   A. What motivated you to begin playing World of Warcraft?

3. How do you feel when you play World of Warcraft?
   A. What in-game activities do you participate in most?
   B. Do you participate in non-game World of Warcraft discussions, information seeking, or shopping? If so, what?

4. How does World of Warcraft fit into your daily/weekly routine?
   A. Has World of Warcraft has affected your life in anyway? If so, how?
   B. How do you balance WoW with the rest of your life?

5. How do your friends, coworkers, and family feel about you playing World of Warcraft?
   A. What kind of comments do your friends, coworkers, and family make about World of Warcraft? How do you respond?
   B. How has World of Warcraft affected your relationships with others?

6. Have your real life and in-game life intersected? If so, how?
   A. Have you met in-game friends face-to-face? Describe the interactions.

7. Has this interview impacted your thoughts/feelings about World of Warcraft? If so, how?

8. Is there anything I may have missed that you would like to share?

**Closing**
I'd like to thank you all once more for participating in my research. I truly appreciate your time and openness in discussing some of your experiences in Azeroth with me. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at sjtidwell@uh.edu.

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