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Fair Game: An Anthropological Study of the Negotiation of Fairness in World of Warcraft

by

Alicia Hibbert

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Examining Committee

Dr. Kathleen Lowrey, Anthropology

Dr. Sean Gouglas, Humanities Computing and History and Classics

Dr. Stan Ruecker, Humanities Computing and English and Film Studies

ABSTRACT

This study examined fairness in the online society of World of Warcraft (WoW), a society under constraint by game developers but dynamically affected by users. Because the society is voluntary, people have the ability to both effect major change on, and leave, that society at any time. Thus, fairness in this virtual world is an important area for anthropological research. In-game fairness pointed to the organization, distribution, and acquisition of wealth. In particular, I examined player perceptions of real-money trading (RMT) in the context of individual and collective motivations in the endgame. In addition, I considered loot distribution systems as a mode of promoting player-initiated definitions of fairness. I discovered an overall economy of fun in which players act to maximize fun for the majority. Real-money trading was justified by casual players because players require progression as individuals in order to better serve the fun of the collective.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of online communities, from text-based to vast graphical environments, is an emerging field, but one that is relevant to modern society as people continually increase the amount of time they choose to engage in these online societies. World of Warcraft is a massively multiplayer online game played by millions of people worldwide, a persistent virtual world in which players engage with other players via the internet. The scope of this game has encouraged me to address the movement of both the self and money into online spaces. World of Warcraft can be considered a human society due to its size, having reached 11.5 million subscribers worldwide (Ziebart 2008). The trade that occurs within games approaches billions of real dollars per year and the products of virtual worlds are traded for real money in the range of hundreds of millions of dollars per year; these numbers are comparable to the Gross Domestic Product of such countries as Nicaragua and Jamaica (Castronova 2007: 6,13).

Research in virtual worlds is anthropologically compelling because these are voluntary societies. That is, people choose to become players. This fact opens up questions of preference not normally available to investigation in ethnographic settings. Online communities are particularly amenable to ethnographic research because offline methods are easily adapted and because potential participants have a vested interest in the community (and thus its study) by choosing to be there.

This thesis examines the idea of fairness in World of Warcraft via the specific medium of money. World of Warcraft players define and dynamically

sculpt a system of proper social etiquette surrounding the in-game currency system. Across the course of the research, the types of systems that players create when they have the highest amount of pressure, the highest stake in risk and reward, and the greatest amount of trust in one another emerged as a particularly interesting focus of study. "Endgame loot distribution", a topic described in detail further on, is where this can be seen most clearly. The way players choose to distribute rare rewards challenge extant social scientific notions about sociability in virtual worlds, about fairness in work and play, and about the possible permeability of the barrier between the virtual (online) and real (offline) worlds.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I have established a high level character in the game, allowing me to network in World of Warcraft throughout the areas that have the highest stakes for most players. I am mainly interested in "endgame" characters: those who have reached the final level and are more socially involved in the game. Endgame play differs from the play of leveling in that the goals of a player change. This is the point in the game that Nick Yee (2007) refers to as Mastery, when players stay to solidify relationships often formed through the game and to have the opportunity to obtain the best gear available, items imbued with "status" and "prestige". As characters gain levels, the economic stakes rise since the amount of money obtainable from battling non-player characters does not rise at the same rate as the amount of money needed for the best armor and weapons. In fact, the time needed to gain a level rises exponentially, as does the cost of maintaining a character. In

addition, endgame play usually requires social interaction with others, while leveling may generally be done alone, so the relationships between people are more meaningful and group achievement is needed to advance individually at the endgame stage. Because there is a relatively large cost to switching characters, and a higher level character has put a significant amount of time into developing that character, the stakes are much higher.

Immersion within a guild, a player-initiated association or community created to achieve common goals, is critical to this research, since competition for resources occurs in inevitable tandem with social and economic cooperation, especially during endgame play. If a player chooses to play alone in the endgame, s/he may choose to do daily quests, make money, and then spend his or her money on items of his/her choosing; however, this is not desirable to most players as the best armor, weapons, potions, and so on, cannot be had in this way.

This study focused on the following specific topics: intra-community exchange, individual and collective motivation, redistribution of wealth, and negotiating the online/offline worlds. My research questions ask: What is "fair" exchange and distribution in-game? How do items and currencies permeate the offline world and what does this mean to players? I examined the processes of allocation through item distribution systems such as the Dragon Kill Points (DKP) system, social distance between players, and the constraints placed on players by game developers, while also reflecting upon the effects of out-of-game virtual good exchanges on ideas about fairness in-game. As ideas about fairness in a game whose player goals include wealth and consumption inevitably involve

economics, money is an important focus. According to Hart, we are only able to make society truly on our own terms when we "master its development, its machines, and its money" (Hart 2005b: 111). Each time a player logs in to World of Warcraft, they affect the development of the society, the institutions of that society, its norms, and its currencies. Players are able to transcend the traditional dichotomy of work vs. play by creating and always reinterpreting the rules of fairness. The "work" of World of Warcraft is appealing due to the ability of players to define a fair existence in their own terms. Most importantly, players have the choice of whether to participate in this society and are increasingly choosing to do so. Fairness, and the ability of players to create a fair society, appears to be a major determinant in why they return, some for 40 hours a week.

While the focus of this research – online communities – is self-evidently valid in Humanities Computing and allied fields, that one can do "real" ethnography in virtual worlds is still novel from the perspective of most anthropologists. Thus, I will begin with a brief overview of the study, followed by an anthropological introduction to World of Warcraft, designed to familiarize non-players with its unique geography, demography, economy, and language.

OVERVIEW

This thesis contributes to the emerging social scientific literature on virtual worlds research, which will be reviewed in greater length in the Literature Review section of this chapter. The specific contribution of the thesis is a qualitative study of casual players, as opposed to research on hardcore players or developers alone,

normally carried out using quantitative methods. I examined my research themes in a voluntary environment, not a laboratory experiment or a real-world society as is typical for economic study. This environment is dynamic and flexible, allowing for players to effect change within the community.

Fairness was examined as a means of understanding the non-competitive and collective aspects of the social life of this online community. This study, of necessity, involves money because the distribution of currency and rewards during collective events is critical to a player's assessment of fair play. Players create new modes of distribution, outside of developer-constrained modes, in order to deal with rewards gained through collective events in the fairest manner possible. Distribution will be described at more length in chapters 2 and 3. The first step in determining the appropriateness of an ethnographic approach to fairness in the value-system of World of Warcraft is to show that World of Warcraft contains a lived human world. I begin, then, with an anthropological account of the World of Warcraft, after which I will turn to the research problem itself and a review of the relevant literature.

HISTORY AND GAMEPLAY

World of Warcraft was founded in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment Incorporated and has achieved a record number of subscriptions for all games of this type, not to mention virtual worlds as a whole, in its almost six years of existence. World of Warcraft is set in a universe also used in earlier (non-MMO) Warcraft titles from Blizzard Entertainment, giving some continuity for

longstanding fans of Warcraft. Servers exist for three groups around the world: North America and the Pacific, Europe, and South America; players interact within these servers but do not interact with other players across these groups. Servers are further divided into four types: Normal PvE, Normal PvP, Roleplaying PvE, and Roleplaying PvP. PvP stands for Player versus Player, a type of gameplay in which players may kill other enemy players. PvP is in opposition to PvE, which stands for Player versus Environment, a type of gameplay in which players may not kill other enemy players, rather only non-player characters, unless players obviously indicate that they are ready for combat in a designated area. Roleplaying is a type of gameplay that may be employed in the PvP and PvE formats, and requires that players consistently remain in character during their dealings in-game. Each of these types of gameplay, and associated servers, give rise to particular local cultures. As of October 2009, there were 111 PvE US servers accessed by players in Canada, the United States and Pacific nations. Many players use online forums to learn about the cultures of different servers in order to find a suitable "home" for their endgame characters. The server where this research was conducted is the US Normal PvE server called Runetotem, of which I have been a member since January 2005.

Once a server is chosen, truly a home community, a player moves into designing and naming his or her character. There are two factions with which players may associate themselves: the Alliance, consisting mainly of characters that look like the "good guys" of fantasy, and the Horde, consisting mainly of the "enemies" in fantasy. For the Alliance, there are five playable "races", known as

Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, Gnomes, and Draenai, while the Horde consists of the Orcs, Trolls, Tauren, Undead, and Blood Elves. As Taylor (2006: 12) notes, races might more usefully be imagined as species types as they are considered separate and distinct categories of creatures. The race chosen limits not only the appearance of a character, but the abilities of a character. Characters are further divided into classes, indicating whether a character will mainly deal damage with spells (caster DPS, or damage-per-second) or in hand-to-hand combat (melee DPS, or damage-per-second), receive and mitigate damage by enemies (tanking), or keep other players alive (healing). Not all classes are present in each race. The nine classes are: Death Knight, Rogue, Shaman, Paladin, Warrior, Priest, Druid, Mage, Warlock. Racial characteristics, combined with the class chosen, affect the overall statistics and abilities of a character. Some classes have mana in order to cast spells, some may be able to employ pets in combat, and others wear strong plate metal armor to reduce their vulnerability to enemies. Every class has its advantages and disadvantages, leading to continual class balancing by developers. Further complicating this, each class has a finite amount of points to "spend" in any combination of three talent groupings, allowing players to fine-tune their play-style.

For example, my level 80 paladin Elandryl resides on the Normal PvE server called Runetotem. I chose a Female Human Paladin for my gender-race-class combination. As a Paladin, I then further chose to spend my talent points as a primary healer (my main specialization, or "spec"), with melee damage-per-second (DPS) as my secondary "spec". Generally, only the primary spec is used

in group endgame events, forcing me to choose the types of armor and weapons I will need to upgrade this spec only.

Figure 1: The appearance, statistics, and armor of Elandryl, October 2009

Geography

The place where these characters live and act is known as Azeroth. In fact, the two "worlds" of Azeroth and Outlands – with a total of 4 continents, numerous sub-regions, and even more cities, outposts, and wild areas – combine to make up the World of Warcraft universe.

Figure 2: The World of Warcraft universe, January 2010

Figure 3: A world map of Azeroth, January 2010

Figure 4: A continent map of Northrend, January 2010

Figure 5: A region map of Crystalsong Forest, January 2010

Figure 6: A city map of Dalaran, January 2010

A newly-established character is encouraged to move throughout the world initially by non-player characters. As the number of quests available to characters in their immediate vicinity dwindles, novice players must move onward, generally directed by another quest to move to a new area. This is built into the design of the game so that players usually interact with other players of a similar skill level, allowing for social development with a cohort. This could be compared to the developmental process undergone in the real world, where children are kept in groupings determined by age, overall experience, and maturity as they move forward with their cohort. In addition, the physical environment available to us as we undergo development is ideally safely challenging in childhood, and then increases in danger and risk as we mature. In much the same way, in World of Warcraft the risk of encountering foes increases

by level. By the time a player reaches the 'endgame' level, his or her character moves freely and adeptly using flying or land-based mounts acquired along the way. Characters travel within their main city for economic activity, or in a variety of places in the world to daily quests or raids.

Figure 7: A flying mount, October 2009

Language

The language specific to World of Warcraft is “chat”. The major portion of the World of Warcraft (WoW)-specific language used in-game, as one might guess from the transformation of the name itself, is acronym-based. Acronyms are used in chat to cut down on the amount of time it takes to communicate frequently-used phrases via text. An interesting feature of communication in World of Warcraft is that audio chat was developed after text chat (as audio chat was not initially coded into the game), reversing the typical order of the development of communication in preliterate and literate societies. While audio chat is used predominantly in organized guild events, text is used in communication across the server, personal communications between individual players, and often in casual guild chat. Possibly because text is the original way to

communicate with people in-game (I only began using audio chat after 60 levels of play), acronyms developed for use in text chat are in fact spoken aloud even in audio chat.

To illustrate this concept, I have included an anonymized transcript of public chat in the trade chat channel with a line-by-line translation in square parentheses following.

[2. Trade] Player 1: WTS Heavy Knothide Leather x 3
[2. Trade] Player 2: WTB port to Dalaran
[2. Trade] Player 1: WTS Heavy Knothide Leather x 34 = 50g
[2. Trade] Player 3: LFM 80'S BT
[2. Trade] Player 2: WTB port to Dalaran
[2. Trade] Player 4: lf healer H UP last 2 bosses

Translation:
[2. Trade] Player 1: [Want to sell 3 Heavy Knothide Leather]
[2. Trade] Player 2: [Want to buy a mage-summoned portal to the city of Dalaran]
[2. Trade] Player 1: [Want to sell 34 Heavy Knothide Leather at 50 gold total]
[2. Trade] Player 3: [Looking for more level 80 players to participate in a raid in the Black Temple]
[2. Trade] Player 2: [Want to buy a mage-summoned portal to the city of Dalaran]
[2. Trade] Player 4: [Looking for a healer class to participate in the Heroic version of the Utgarde Pinnacle dungeon for the final two strong enemies to overcome only]

This is a clear example of the brevity that chat allows. Adeptness with chat and with the special kinds of joking, sarcasm, and irony specific to chat, marks the user as a "native" speaker. My fluency with chat, developed through playing for a lengthy time prior to research, helped me to gain rapport with others as a true participant in the community. Appendix A further presents a very minute sampling of commonly used words and acronyms and their definitions which may be consulted where an explanation of a term is not given.

Economy

To give an idea of the size of the economy on each server, we can calculate the overall wealth in-circulation at a given time on Runetotem. Most endgame players could expect to have at least 2000 gold at any given time. This virtual gold can be exchanged for U.S. Dollars; 2000 gold sells for about $15.95 USD on internet gold-selling sites such as IGE (IGE.com 2010). On Runetotem, there are about 12 000 characters, over 6800 of whom are at level 80. Supposing that the average amount of gold held by any level under 80 was (conservatively) 100 gold, this gives 14,120,000 as the size of the Runetotem economy. Per server, this would be equivalent to a modest economy of $112 607 USD. In addition, if we multiply the $15.95 USD in gold owned per player by 11 million players, we could calculate an aggregate for all of World of Warcraft at $175, 450, 000 USD. This compares to the Gross Domestic Product of small nations like Tonga or Palau based on 2007 data (UNdata 2010a and 2010b).

After players commence in-game play, and early on in the process of achieving higher and higher levels, they are given a choice of profession from a limited set of options. It is effectively impossible to advance in the game without choosing at least one profession. Primary professions fall into two categories: gathering and manufacturing. Alchemy, Blacksmithing, Enchanting, Engineering, Jewelcrafting, Leatherworking, Tailoring, and Inscription all take raw materials of one form or another and turn them into items to be consumed by players. Herbalism, Mining, and Skinning allow the player to gather raw materials to be used in manufacturing or sold to those in need for their own manufacturing.

Cooking, First Aid, and Fishing make up the Secondary professions, all of which may be carried out by any player, regardless of his/her primary profession. Products may be consumed by their makers, given as gifts, or sold indirectly at the Auction House, a building located in a few cities where players may commit an item to auction through the interface with a cut of sales going to the Auction House. Products may also be sold by advertising on a chat channel, or by speaking to another player directly.

The World of Warcraft economy is more obviously centrally managed than those of real-life nations. First, money is constantly being created by built-in game features so inflation is a problem. In World of Warcraft, in-game money (gold, silver, and copper) is created and destroyed in order to achieve a balance and reduce the possibility of out of control inflation. Game designers constantly have to stay ahead of player innovations. For individual players, acquiring as much gold as possible is desirable, while inflation reduces the collective fun of the game, and its appeal to player-customers overall. Money is created in many ways. Some examples include when a player kills a mob, which will "drop" money when it dies; when a player completes a quest by communicating with the appropriate non-player character and receiving the quest reward; when a player sells an item to a vendor, usually either a low quality or unusable soulbound item (see Chapter 2, pg. 57); or on a new server to which a character is transferred. Money is destroyed, or absorbed back into the game, generally through payments to non-player characters. Payments might be for armor repairs, necessary to keep the player's defenses at a maximum and with greater cost for better armor; costs

for training new spells and abilities as the character levels and for retraining each time the character wishes to change the primary and secondary specialization of abilities; flights used for longer transportation where and when players are unable to use personal flying mounts; or auction house deposits, which increase as the projected value of the time at auction increases. Finally, if a character is put out of use or transferred to another server, his or her in-game gold disappears with him/her from the old server.

Guilds

In moving around the world, gaining levels, and interacting with other players, eventually players reach a point in which they join a guild. A guild is a voluntary association of players, generally with common play-styles or similar skill levels. Guilds can range in size from 5 members to 200 members and they range from very casual and social, to very goal-directed. Some schedule raids multiple nights per week. Guilds are formally supported associations; that is, guild organization is coded into the game user interface (Taylor 2006: 40). In general, guilds allow players to become part of a consistent social group with common interests who may help each other in many ways, including: questing together, providing materials to one another for no or low cost, and providing a social forum for meeting others in-game.

Endgame

As with its in-game economy, the World of Warcraft itself is constantly exceeding its existing limits. During the time of this research, endgame changed from meaning a level 70 character to meaning a level 80 character due to an

expansion released in November 2008 that increased the final attainable level. This is but one issue pointing to the dynamic environment that World of Warcraft presents for a research locale, requiring methodological adaptability.

The rarest items in the endgame are obtained through a process known as "raiding". In raids, groups of either 10 or 25 players coordinate their skills in a military-like fashion in order to kill a difficult monster. With success comes the possibility of obtaining and then distributing generally one to four reward items. It is important to note the discrepancy between the number of players at raids and the number of rewards available. Because of this, players return to raiding again and again. Raids are generally organized best via guilds, rather than through pick-up groups (PUGs) of non- guildmates. Conducting a 10 or 25 person event, the success of which is predicated upon specific actions at specific times by specific types of characters, requires a certain amount of trust between players and in the direction given by leaders. The time invested in raiding by players who do not receive a reward at any given raid may be repaid at a later date when they do receive a reward while others leave empty-handed. The social tie between the members in these groups determines how items are allocated to players, resulting in a tension between individual and collective motivation that is constantly being negotiated between guild members of varying ranks. Guilds are generally organized into a variety of ranks, with rights and responsibilities attributed to each of these.

In the endgame, communication among players is more sustained, creating stronger social bonds between players (Taylor 2006: 42). The main task of an

endgame player is to participate in raids, generally organized by the guild. The guild functions primarily as an organizational body to schedule consistent raids for a group of players and to cooperatively forward individual guild members' progress through the game. One way in which guilds do this is via collecting rare raw materials in guild events and redistributing these to guild members in order to create rare items and to increase profession skills. Players enter guilds to forward individual progress but the guild format creates and requires collective trust, a quality necessary when players are committing lengthy amounts of time to engaging in guild events. This trust is based on reputation and responsibility and it is critical in all guilds, whether they are dominated by casual or "hardcore" players (Taylor 2006: 43). The guild then functions as a central institution responsible for ensuring that items made available in the raid are distributed according to the needs of players and in a fair manner. In this way, players must put their trust in the guild hierarchy that fairness will be upheld. The term loot refers to the rewards – armor, weapons, and materials – that are made available to players who have participated in the major raid event of killing a rare and hard-to-defeat monster through the coordinated effort of the group. Loot distribution is an issue in the game because a particular rare monster may reveal only two items at one time, when 25 people have worked together to kill it. Cooperative distribution of loot, then, is not a simple issue to resolve.

In World of Warcraft, most items are given one of two designations: Bind on Equip (BoE) or Bind on Pickup (BoP). In both cases, the designation indicates the soulbinding of items to players, which means that once an item is either

equipped (the icon is dragged into the relevant space from the character's inventory in the character view interface) or picked up (the item obtained from killing a monster is placed in a character's inventory), it can no longer be exchanged in any way with other players. It can only be destroyed or sold to a non-player character, essentially back into the game. This is a very important mechanism because it makes items rarer than they would be even given a low rate of appearance during a raid. It causes the rarest of items to move completely out of circulation and forces people to rely on one another to access these items. This represents one mode of constraint introduced by World of Warcraft developers and navigated in unique ways by individuals. Thus, players in guilds navigate this problem by developing collective rules pertaining to how loot is to be allocated among them. One of these methods of loot distribution is known as the Dragon-Kill Points (DKP) system.

At its most basic, the intent of DKP is to award the most points to players who attend the most raids, allowing these players to spend their points on the greatest number of rewards. However, the problem of inflation arises when there are a lot of players remaining in the same guild (and thus accruing these points) for years. The number of points spent in a situation with long-term players is relatively low to those being earned by these players because a player may achieve all that they desire from the available raids and yet continue to accrue points indefinitely. One way of dealing with this is to raise the DKP cost per looted item, but of course such a change would create great difficulty for newer members to the guild to obtain items.

As a result, a number of derivative DKP systems have been developed to account for inflation. These systems are generally referred to as DKP systems but may have a qualifier in the name, such as “Zero-Sum”. In Zero-Sum DKP, points are awarded only when an item drops from a monster kill during a raid and is subsequently purchased by a player. The points used to purchase the item are then spread through all members except the member doing the purchasing. In this way, the number of points within the system remains relatively the same. In order to choose who should spend points on a given item, either the highest point holder or the highest player on a rotating list of players spends a set amount of points on the item. The creation of such complex loot distribution systems forms as a result of the continual negotiation between developers' and players' intentions in the game. It is when the game's structures cause player dissatisfaction that players innovate.

DKP and Local Currency

Economic anthropologist Keith Hart (2005b:170) argues that “local currencies” are those made and maintained by average citizens to promote meaningful connections between one another. He envisions a future in which money could be a measure of what people do with one another, or a real measure of social credit. One currency will not meet the needs of everyone, so multiple currencies will be used based on their moral-value association, helped along by technological capacity to track this information electronically (Hart 2005b: 170). He examines the Euro as an intermediate example of this: a currency created by a community, one which originated in an intangible form (traded before any minting), but which is still influenced by a multitude of governments (Hart

2005a). The Euro system, however, like traditional money systems, only rewards people based on individual progression and self-interest. Private money systems in World of Warcraft, those used within guilds to deal with distribution of rare items, demonstrate many of the qualities of local currencies, as described by Hart. I will further examine how such local currencies might complement overall social health while also satisfying individual motivations.

The Dragon-Kill Points (DKP) system is a private money system through which people are forced to adhere to rules of social cohesion in order to avoid removal from the society, and thus the removal of their ability to spend money earned through collective achievement (Fairfield and Castronova 2006). Having been involved in guilds in the past that both did and did not utilize DKP, it was obvious to me that social distance might affect fairness. Whether this locally-created money system also contributed to notions of fairness emerged as an important area of investigation. DKP, though having many specific forms, generally adheres to the following criteria: it is used in guilds dominated by endgame players who routinely engage in raiding, it is used to track the points obtained by players for doing collective tasks where they may or may not have the opportunity to receive rewards, and the collected points of an individual are spent like money in the instant that a BoP (bind on pickup) item is revealed during a raid. Each DKP system within a guild is isolated from other guilds and DKP points cannot be spent outside of the guild in which they were earned. DKP, therefore, is based on a form of social credit, or the labor an individual player engages in for the guild's benefit as a whole. A player will receive DKP for

attendance and participation in 10-25 character raid groups that work together in a unique dungeon to kill very difficult monsters and attain their rare loot; it encourages participation, reliability, and cooperation by rewarding players for exhibiting these values (Mortensen 2006: 404).

The idea of DKP as a private money system becomes academically intriguing when we apply research on local currency to this system. DKP is not exchangeable with other currencies and has no meaning outside of the guild in which it was earned (Malone 2007: 6). The DKP system cultivates reciprocity among members by keeping value within the small group and acts as a form of credentialism, marking players with a large cache of DKP points as both experienced and reliable (Malone 2007: 6). DKP is occasionally described by players as having cultural value with no material value, especially since there are rules applied to which items can be had by whom (Malone 2007: 17). Cultural value also comes from the artifact-like qualities of a rare item, showing that the bearer went through a trial in order to obtain it (Malone 2007: 18). Although, as we shall see when we take up a discussion of real-money trading (RMT) in World of Warcraft, rare items added to a character may in fact translate directly to material value.

Very few studies have as yet been done on DKP (Malone 2007; Castronova and Fairfield 2008) and none have addressed loot distribution systems in casual guilds. The goals of a casual guild are much less regimented than a self-described hardcore guild, and often display an emphasis on sociability over accomplishment. While membership in a hardcore guild may result in telephone

calls at 2am to play, as Malone (2007) experienced during her study, casual guilds have lower participation requirements for their members. Casual guilds will often refrain from using DKP either because they are small enough that the same players always play and reliability is not an issue, or because they trust that the casual gamer is more interested in seeing content than in getting items. The coded-in loot distribution systems, however, are often not satisfying to a casual guild because developers' have not placed an emphasis on social cohesion in this structure. It is important to study loot distribution from a casual perspective as a complement to the hardcore perspective because the casual guild places a higher emphasis on valuing collective progress rather than individual progress as a motivating factor for achievement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research draws upon a variety of disciplines, covering game design, economics, and psychology, among others, but is grounded within anthropological theory and methods. Literature in economic anthropology deals with fairness and altruism as well as gift-giving, reciprocity and redistribution. In addition, this study is informed by cyberculture studies, particularly past ethnographies in virtual worlds, examination of relevant aspects of game design, fairness and online play, and synthetic economies.

Virtual Worlds

The proposed research draws upon the previous generation of text-based interaction in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), while utilizing the dynamic visual

aspect of the current virtual worlds. Research in this area in the 1990s has focused on dichotomies: offline versus online, work versus play, virtual versus real (Waskul 1996, Reid 1996). Anything happening on the computer screen in terms of interaction is generally thought to encompass the "virtual", including online forums and message boards, and textual chat (Waskul 1996, Reid 1996). In the 1990s literature, virtual interaction was said to occur in direct opposition to interaction off the computer screen, or interaction with a "real" person known in a physical sense (Waskul 1996, Reid 1996). This single dichotomy was then dissected and related to components of the online experience: questions about the community become debates about the realness of a group of people as community; questions about relationships and interaction become debates about the public and the private; questions about economy become debates about work, play, and materiality; and questions about internet research ethics become debates about how online and offline methods differ. These debates stem from the initial splitting of the virtual and the real in online interaction, which led to increasing confusion as technology became both more sophisticated and more widely-used. This is not to say that online research and interaction in general are not different from their offline counterparts; rather, there is a significant blending of influence between each domain, where influence notably goes both ways. My research addresses this by aiming to understand exchange and interaction in its context, both online and offline. This will become especially important in analyzing relationships among players and in talking about Real Money Trading (RMT).

The online-offline, virtual-real dichotomies are in part irrelevant to the

discussion of virtual worlds, particularly virtual world economies, due to the very existence of real money trading (RMT). Actions in World of Warcraft are often very repetitive, can be stressful, and can be financially-oriented. If I sit my character at a mining node for hours, mining each time the "virtual" ore appears (every few minutes), with the goal of selling this ore in the "virtual" auction house so as to use the resulting gold to make a large in-game purchase, work appears to bleed into the game-play. If I buy an exceptional in-game item with this gold and then sell the access to my character (the username and password) on eBay for $500 CDN, a distinction between the virtual and the real in consumption becomes rather blurred. In examining these kinds of exchanges, it takes very little time to see that work/play and material/immaterial dichotomies cannot capture the scenario because their analytic rigidity is inconsistent with the lived experience of players. The synthetic world and the real world, as players know it, are both real (Castronova 2005b: 147).

Economist Edward Castronova's work has focused on the economies present in virtual worlds. His was perhaps the earliest research on the question of how virtual economies might affect real world economies and vice versa (Castronova 2002). His ideas draw upon Huizinga's seminal World War II-era writings in which Huizinga argued that play creates a temporary world inside of the real world. For Castronova (2005b: 147), the synthetic (temporary or play) world has a membrane surrounding it, but this membrane is porous so that value flows between the synthetic world and the "real" world. This flow makes the term "virtual" increasingly irrelevant as virtual goods become very real, making online

activity less of a metaphor of offline activity (Castronova 2005b: 148). Not only do the stakes involved in loot distribution speak to the flow between the synthetic and the real in terms of moral value, but the trade of virtual goods with real money provides a strong example of the porosity of the membrane between the two spaces. The Terms of Service, End User License Agreement, game restrictions, and player-interpreted rules are the materials of the membrane itself. These constraints frequently aim to separate character/currency from player/money, but as we will see, such constraints form a barrier that is continually being worked through by players in order to achieve optimal levels of fun in-game and out-of-game.

This study expands upon the call for additional research from the work of Edward Castronova as well as the need for additional qualitative studies in virtual worlds to enhance the predominantly quantitative studies that have already been carried out (Yee 2009). I chose to examine fairness in order to determine how we might be able to use virtual world studies, specifically within a vast game-based world economy, to generalize about people's desire to create fair economic spaces that reward for locally-conceived moral values. The virtual environment is particularly important for research due to the sheer number of people choosing to participate in this area over others and due to the capacity for people to effect change on the social environment of this community. This research study is a step towards understanding the interplay between work, fun, subjective value, rule-breaking, localized currencies, and governance.

Economics

Economists Fiddick and Cummins (2007) have developed experiments demonstrating that norms concerning fairness are relationship-specific, concluding that in relationships where people come from different levels in a hierarchy, higher-level individuals are expected to act in a way that benefits subordinates, at the cost of individual motivation. This study promotes the idea that those in higher hierarchical positions act against individual self-interest and allow for free-riding by subordinates: those with higher status, not necessarily income, showed low levels of disgruntlement at being cheated by those in lower positions (Fiddick and Cummins 2007: 24). We can thus conclude that high status people are expected to be more tolerant of cheating, and indeed do act more tolerant of cheating, by people lower in the hierarchy than themselves. This leads me to assume that high status players would be more tolerant of gold farming, real money trading, and generally being taken advantage of by lower status (casual) players. This is important background on what is expected to occur in guilds. Economists Berninghaus et al. (2008) have demonstrated through anecdotal experiments that direct negotiation among people results in less greed. Because negotiations in guilds involve direct communication regularly, we would expect people to have high expectations for fairness in-guild.

The economics of fun in online games such as World of Warcraft is generated by reaching goals, consuming luxuries, using prestige items, accumulating, receiving fair return, creating, and competing (Castronova 2005b: 177-179). Castronova argues that these interactions are based on human impulses

that help to drive the purchasing of virtual loot, where the real-life rich can be rich again on the online stage (Castronova 2005b: 150,170). Exchange in games such as World of Warcraft indeed takes on very offline-like qualities. As Castronova points out, two parties with complementary abilities (services) or resources (items) engage in a mutually beneficial exchange (2001: 12). In this way, there is very little structural difference between an in-game exchange and offline exchange. Just as I would purchase clothing from a store to maintain my appearance, so I would go to an armorsmith when I require a new weapon to maintain my in-game status. In neo-classical economics, value is considered to be subjective to the individual (Castronova 2002: 15), meaning that whether it is a material rare hockey card or archaeological artifact, or my in-game Ancient Scepter of Sue-Min, the value of each is a real value whether in game or out because it is grounded in individual preferences. In contrast, anthropology examines economics from the social standpoint. The economic situation in World of Warcraft is especially interesting, then, as players are directed through developers' choices to progress individually through socially-motivated means.

Sociology

In a 2006 study of World of Warcraft players by sociologists Nardi and Harris, over 75% of the people they interviewed were currently playing with offline friends and/or family in the online gaming environment (2006: 153). Internet users in general are said to be more social, having a greater amount of interaction with real-life acquaintances both online and offline (DiMaggio et al. 2001: 318). Some players interact with friends located a large distance away

within the gaming world, allowing them to retain a joint activity which acted to reduce social distance (Nardi and Harris 2006: 153). In addition, the online gaming environment, through a continuum with the offline environment, allows the player to make a choice where they wish to blend roles and acquaintances.

Anthropology

An examination of the constraints on players introduced into the game by developers is critical for a study informed by the limitations of the player in his/her environment, ensuring the emergence of relevant themes. Castronova's work has shown that people will pay money to be constrained in a virtual world, as opposed to people in the real world who pay to have constraints removed (Castronova 2002:16). In a sense, then, we are happy to be constrained when we believe we are participating in a game, since a challenge is often part of the game; whereas in our daily lives, the constraints placed upon us we do not consider to be "fun" or a "game". In the area of the game, obstacles can promote well-being since they are more achievable, with much lower stakes, than real-life goals. So, achieving these goals brings happiness, one established goal of our behavior (Castronova 2002:17).

In order to properly understand the constraints imposed upon the virtual environment by developers, it is crucial to look at the role of the developer in shaping the code. Little ethnography has actually been done with game developers by those also studying virtual worlds, but Malaby (2006a) provides an exceptional case. In the case of Second Life, developers allow users to retain intellectual property rights to virtual products, while maintaining governance over

the virtual world code manipulation (Malaby 2006a). Bartle (2006) argues that developers act as gods instead of governments since they can change the laws of physics and they cannot be deposed by the users, acting externally on the virtual world. Thus the role of the code and the coders must be looked at in terms of an external force with unique abilities.

Fairness in Anthropology

One of the pivotal figures in anthropological discussions of fairness is Marcel Mauss, and in particular his essay The Gift (2002 [1954]), which examined the potlatch ceremony in Northwest coast indigenous society. This research addresses traditional concepts in economic anthropology such as the notion of the gift, reciprocity, and the interplay between social norms and individual preference. The overall result of the potlatch is a purposeful waste. Mauss (2002) argues that gifts are always given with some expectation by the giver for reciprocal exchange. The importance of reciprocal exchange can be related to the pressure on a guild to create fair loot distribution systems in order to reward players in an acceptable way for their input in the guild as a group. What is surprising is the degree to which people choose cooperation over individual gain online.

Real Money Trading (RMT)

In 2006, Castronova was beginning to assert the importance of studying real money trading due to its scope – at that time, estimates were exceeding $100 million each year in sales of gold, goods, and leveled characters (Castronova 2006: 51). While he estimated that one third of all players in virtual worlds were

engaging in RMT, he stated that as many players wanted the possibility totally eliminated (Castronova 2006: 56). Real money trading has positive and negative aspects for players. On the positive side, the player who gets to save their time leveling characters and acquiring rare goods is happy because they can be the player they want to be in exchange for their real world money. On the negative side, real money trading ruins the "game feel" by changing the in-game economy (in-game money and goods experience inflation due to the ability of people to purchase them), by spamming gold-selling advertisements in a person's chat window, and by the need for players to compete with gold farmers in acquiring resources.

The major contributors to real money trading (RMT) resources are players in Asian countries who work, as their main source of real world income, to obtain in-game items and currency to be sold to players elsewhere. This type of activity has been noted across multiple game titles, such as Lineage II (Steinkuehler 2006: 203) and EverQuest (Castronova 2002). These players are not-so-affectionately referred to as gold farmers. They are hired by a company offline to work at playing the game online so that the fruits of their labours can be transferred online to other players (Castronova 2002: 22). Perceptions about real-money trading are especially key to the theme of fairness as it relates to the issue of how cheating is defined in the game. In one sense, real-money trading is a form of cheating because it brings "work" into the game, but clerical tasks, planning, and management all occur in MMOGs, just as they occur in daily jobs offline (Yee 2006: 69). In another sense, real-money trading is simply a form of rule-breaking

because Blizzard Entertainment forbids it. However, as we will see, when the overall outcome of real-money trading is a happy casual player, able to maintain progress with more hardcore players, fairness may be achieved through rule-breaking. I investigated fairness through participant observation and interviewing in World of Warcraft, having established my character's presence on a server previous to commencing research. Fairness is examined through not only the research themes, but also through particular methodological considerations.

CHAPTER 1

This examination of fairness necessarily involves serious consideration of methodology and ethics, touching upon how offline methodologies can be transferred online where the participant may or may not be physically observed. Ethical issues are sometimes transformed in the online environment. This has historically been addressed mainly in text-based environments such as MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and online forums, but ethical consideration within the 3D interactive world is receiving increasing attention. In my research I found consent could be achieved online in a way that is more natural to the participant in this setting than an in-person discussion of a paper consent form. This research also demonstrates the benefits of recording chat text and audio-based interviews.

METHODOLOGY

Themes

Interviews focused on the following themes:

- **basic player information** – the type of characters played, the guilds with which a player is a member, amount of time played per week
- **interaction** – the kinds of relationships players share with other players, how relationships might affect pricing in exchanges, the kinds of things players do for others, whether players expect tips for service
- **the collective** - how rewards are distributed in group situations, how players deal with collectively-owned resources, the management of the guild hierarchy

- **fairness –** the definition of fair play, the relationship between the player and game developer, player assessment of real money trading

The questions asked in the interview were designed to be dynamic: they changed over time to reflect the responses received, questions were added depending on where the conversation naturally led, and not all questions were asked of every participant. A good future direction for this research might include expanding the interview process to include focus groups, either using thematic direction or informal group interviews.

Participant Recruitment

My character interacted with other players in the context of normal game-play, competing for resources and communicating both in-game and out. Having already established a high level character in the game allowed me to network and move in the economy. A player's reputation is key to his/her ability to be trusted in social groupings; therefore, my immersion within a guild and experience in the game itself was critical to this research. While a researcher could indeed begin their research at a lower level of play aiming to achieve the final level, this would take considerable time. At the time that research began, I had been playing on the same server for three and a half years, and had achieved an “end-game” character.

During the course of this research, I was a member of five guilds. The first guild carried some members into the second guild, which was created as a result of the first guild's leader taking a lengthy absence from play but refusing to concede leadership to another member. The third guild again carried over many

members of the second guild, following in-guild conflict that prompted a large group of members to break off into new guilds. Eventually this guild dissolved as well and I chose not to follow the majority of members to a fourth guild. Instead, I joined a guild containing some characters with whom I had interacted for a couple of years. Finally, that guild also dissolved because members were unable to maintain regular attendance at raids. I now find myself with continued membership in a fifth guild, in which a real-life acquaintance of mine is a regular raider. Taylor (2006) describes a similar process of flow between guilds in *Play Between Worlds* where the family guild she had membership in broke apart and regrouped with some of the same people many times over.

For this research, I conducted recorded semi-structured interviews with seven players, most of which were then followed up through a variety of more informal means, such as Gmail chat, MSN messenger, in-game chat, or audio chat. I had countless hours of informal conversations with players, having consistent communication with nearly one hundred players. I found informal participation quite easy to access but there were some barriers to formal recording, including taking a player away from their current audio chat with a group, scheduling interviews, and requesting one-on-one conversations.

I conducted semi-structured interviews in both text-based and audio chat format. In order to proceed through guild strictures of authority, I contacted a member of at least officer rank first with information about my research. I then proceeded, with permission, to post about my research on the guild's online forums, inviting those interested and available to prompt me about an interview,

in addition to personally asking those with whom I had extensive contact. The synchronous nature of gameplay affected my ability to interact with people from different time zones, so that participants were generally physically located within the United States and Canada.

Spradley (1979:54) suggests that a good participant is one who will have engaged within the culture for a lengthy period of time, who is currently involved in the culture, who is not a social scientist, and who has adequate time to communicate with the researcher. As most players at endgame have their own supply of in-game gold, it was not necessary to offer compensation to those who participated, although I did purchase inexpensive in-game treat food items, such as brownies, as a gift. This research did not involve interviewing people in recognized categories of "vulnerability"; however, as identity could not be visually verified in most cases, it was particularly important that the right of refusal was evident from the very early stages of this research.

In order to prepare for an interview and its analysis, I had to develop familiarity in the semantics of the dialect (Spradley 1979:18). As was described in the Introduction, my experience in World of Warcraft previous to the commencement of research was invaluable. This is evident in a short sample of chat text describing a raid event:

> Corporal whispers: we even 19 manned obsidian sanctum
> To Corporal: lol
> To Corporal: ya and i was disappointed in the mt healer
> To Corporal: i was ot healer and my ot had to tank b/c she ran oom and didn't call it
> To Corporal: so mt died

[Translation]
Corporal whispers: we completed killing all of the bosses in the raid obsidian sanctum with 19 players instead of the usual 25.
To Corporal: laugh out loud.
To Corporal: yes and I was disappointed in the player whose role was to heal the main tank, or damage-receiving class, in the encounter.
To Corporal: My role was the off-tank healer, or the person who heals the tank whose role is to receive damage when there is more than one enemy against the group. My off-tank target had to fulfill the main tank role because the main tank's healer used all of her mana too quickly, causing her to run out of mana, unable to cast spells. She failed to announce this as well to the group.
To Corporal: So the main tank died as a result because various healers were not notified of her need for support.

My previous experience within World of Warcraft has helped me to learn the ways various terms and acronyms are used in common conversation. In World of Warcraft, linguistic competence may be achieved through learning WoW-specific abbreviations and terms in addition to more general "leetspeak". Leetspeak is a loose adaptation of English, lacking a formal structure, with roots in the early hacker culture ("hacker" refers to early computer users who developed skills in exploring software) (Wikipedia 2010). Leetspeak is based in the written language but is also spoken in World of Warcraft audio chats. Table 1 is a basic chart with leetspeak guidelines for reference.

Table 1: Leetspeak guidelines

Guideline	**Example**
Swapping suffixes: -s for -z	"Hacks" becomes "Hackz"
Swapping suffixes: -er/-r for -xor/zor	"Hacker" becomes "Haxor"
Swapping suffixes: -ed becomes -d or -t	"Pwned" (Owned, or completely destroyed by a player or non-player character) becomes "Pwnd" or "Pwnt"
Popular typos	"The/Ever/Own" have been popularly written as "teh/evar/pwn" based on frequent typos
Preferring lowercase use rather than following capitalization rules	Names such as "Jim" are simply written as "jim"
Adding the suffix -age to a verb to make a noun and using this with the form "to be" rather than "to have"	"He pwns" becomes "He is pwnage"
Adding the suffix -ness to adjectives to make nouns	"He is awesome" becomes "He is awesomeness"
Overuse of exclamation points	"He pwns" becomes "He pwns!!!"
An overall tone of sarcasm or irony	"He is a horrible player" might become "He is teh best evar!!"

Source: Wikipedia.com, "leet", accessed February 2010.

In addition to understanding leetspeak elements mixed into conversation, a player is also expected to demonstrate competence with terms and abbreviations specific to World of Warcraft. An extensive glossary of these can be found in Appendix A: Table 1. Abbrevations can refer to the roles players have, the actions they wish to perform, player statistics, emotions, and so on. These WoW-specific terms and abbreviations are extensive, making a player susceptible to losing competence during any extensive breaks in playing. This has occurred to me several times over the course of the past few years that I have been playing.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I favored a semi-structured interviewing approach that is synchronous (chat occurs back-and-forth in real-time) but allows for both audio and text-based interviewing, depending upon the wishes of the player. Interviews occurred synchronously via in-game chat, out-of-game chat (the integrated chat function present in Gmail), and out-of-game audio. While World of Warcraft does have a built-in audio function, this was developed rather recently in the history of the game and players still mainly rely upon third-party programs such as Ventrilo for their use.

Throughout the interviewing process, I discovered that audio-based interviews were more data-rich, clear, and coherent than interviews in other formats, and they allowed me to lead the participant through a variety of topics. Text-based interviews seemed to take longer as both participants in the interview took time to type their end of the conversation, and it was much easier for the participant to be distracted by the chat text and other goings-on on the screen. In addition, pause and inflection are entirely lost through this method. While I would certainly still support this method for use with those not familiar with audio chat, and for the convenience of having an already-transcribed interview, I found the text-based synchronous interview to be best implemented as a secondary option.

Recording

Text-based interviews were recorded using the automatic text recording capabilities already built into World of Warcraft. That this is available to any player contributes to the "public-ness" of the space, later to be examined in ethical

terms. Verbal interviews were recorded through a freeware program called Audacity, which affords the possibility to record both the incoming sound from the speakers and the outgoing sound from the microphone. This program also permits some editing of files for clarity or for thematic sectioning. In addition, I received ethical clearance to record my screen through a screencasting program. While I did not ultimately find this useful in so small a project in scope in terms of data collection, I certainly would recommend this option to those interested in the physical aspects of game-play such as the look and feel of an exchange, or a raid, or for supplementary materials to be used in the presentation of research to groups of people less familiar with the online environment.

Audio

Traditionally, anthropologists have used hand-held recorders as a means of obtaining a sound snapshot of both formal and informal interviews in the field. The process of audio recording for this project, however, initially posed some technical problems. Since I planned to interact with participants online, the hand-held recording device would not be feasible. The notion of getting participants to record themselves in a separate location from me, either via a sound recording program on the computer or with a hand-held device, also seemed to be an excessively simulated activity. Since most World of Warcraft interaction occurs via in-game textual chat or out-of-game audio chat in a program such as Ventrilo, I was interested in recording these more "natural" modes of interaction.

In order to record the audio-based chat in Ventrilo, I needed a program with the capacity to record all of the sounds that the sound card on my computer

produced, both incoming and outgoing sound. As mentioned previously, the Audacity program served this purpose. While audio recording was used here for the purposes of semi-formal interviewing only, informal group conversations within the Ventrilo application and in-game audio chat during pick-up group play would also prove data-rich. Audio files produced from such recording can be transcribed, coded, and analyzed in the traditional sense.

Text

Text-based interviews are easily recorded in World of Warcraft by typing "/chatlog" into the chat pane, after which point all chat is saved to a text file. While this is a viable option for those not wishing to speak via audio chat, either in normal game-play or for the purposes of the interview, there are some negative aspects associated with text-based interview recording, to add to those already outlined in terms of the quality of the interview. If the researcher's character is present in a major city or popular area, for example, the chatlog may be inundated with extraneous chat. While it is possible in most cases to reduce the different types of chat seen by the user, this can take some time to set up. The researcher should use the most private chat mode available while the character is physically located in an unpopulated location to reduce background noise. The person-to-person chat in World of Warcraft is called the whisper, and allows chat among two players to remain at least as private as their screens allow.

Photography and film certainly have set precedents in anthropological investigation, although there remains a divide between literature-based anthropologists and observational filmmakers (Henley 2004:111). Initially, I felt

that screen recording would be especially rich in the online environment, due to its capacity to permit immersion in a way that previous text-based studies have not (Henley 2004:111). Not only would images of this kind allow for generation and recording of ideas, but they could serve a very important purpose in marketing the study of online environments to those who are wholly unfamiliar with them. Existing case studies of online environments treat them in book format, usually without images, as if they can only be described textually. When speaking of online photography and film, we can refer to these methods as screenshots and screencasts.

Screenshots are an image file of what is seen on the computer screen at a given moment. Screenshots could be used as a way of recording more static occurrences, such as the appearance of an individual or a small group, or smaller-scale actions (running quests or simply hanging out with other players). These are easily taken on a PC via the Print Screen option and are automatically saved to a subdirectory of the World of Warcraft program files. Screencasts are much more involved, but are essentially a large number of rapidly recorded screenshots, appearing as a movie of the on-screen action. As Udell (2005) states, the setting of these films is wholly the computer screen, and programs capable of performing these functions arose from the needs of technology marketers for computer application training videos. Screencasts allow for synchronous display during interview (Henley 2004:114). While screencasts were investigated as a possible mode of data collection for this study, ultimately time constraints did not allow the collection and analysis of both audio and video formats; however, these would

be especially beneficial to those engaging in lengthier studies that emphasize the embodied aspects of the avatar, including in-game coded forms of physical communication, as well as those interested in dissecting the dynamic action of the raid from a physical, textual, and audio communication standpoint.

RESEARCH THROUGH GAMEPLAY

This research draws upon a variety of disciplines, including game design, economics, and psychology, among others, but is grounded within anthropological theory and methods. As my research was conducted in a virtual environment, or synthetic world (see Malaby 2006b for a discussion of terminology), special ethical and methodological considerations pertain to this study. It cannot be assumed that offline research methods apply online in the same ways that they do offline. Some considerations include the inability of the researcher to verify identifying factors visually, the need for defining public and private spaces, and for defining terms in their context (Whiteman 2007; Wilson and Peterson 2002). I needed to adapt interviewing methods to the medium and language most suited to participants, allowing them to remain in the virtual world while giving a response (Whiteman 2007).

As outlined in the introduction, this study occurs on a Normal PVE (Player vs. Environment) server called Runetotem, housing the virtual world. This type of server is distinct from PVP servers, which allow for combat with opposing players anywhere, at anytime, and from Role-Playing servers that require players to maintain the storyline of the game at all times. Generally, players work

together against non-player characters. The Normal server is rich for study because it allows for the online/offline continuum of people and society, while a role-playing server would require a distinct sense of self different from that of a person offline.

While most ethical considerations were easily adapted to research in World of Warcraft, one in particular stands out as requiring special care: informed consent.

Consent and Assent

While the use of a hand-signed consent form was not culturally appropriate in this context, as I was not meeting with participants in person and participants cannot be expected to have access to scanners and fax machines, a consent form was either e-mailed or sent through in-game mail to participants based on their preference. A typed acknowledgment of the consent form's contents was returned. Because I contacted guild leadership first, the entirely voluntary nature of participation was reiterated throughout discussions, especially in one-to-one communication. In each interview, I made clear that prospective individual interviewees could decline to be interviewed or decline to answer any questions during the interview process. Any bias I introduced by initial contact with guild leadership was resolved by a general call for participation on community discussion forums, widening the scope of the research process.

I should note that due to the nature of the research location as a game in no way owned or developed by me, and thus with no way for me to control the player base, in the collective gameplay experience it is impossible for me to avoid

interaction completely with minors. Since I introduced myself as a researcher to guild leaders, and not simply a player, everyone had access to information about my role. For this research project, I chose not to include minors as participants. While a person could argue that I have no way of knowing whether a participant is actually a minor or not, and I certainly did not ask for a scanned form of ID, guild members can become fairly close. It is through discussion with members as a group that the age range of players becomes apparent. I did, however, develop an assent form for minors to obtain more information about the project during my role as participant observer. The assent form acknowledges the fact that any minors involved in this study would be of reading age and sufficiently mature to interact in-game with adults. As a result, some terminology from the adult consent form was used in the assent form.

Confidentiality became an interesting consideration as I truly felt that I was the person stressing the subject in most cases, not the participant. Most participants were happy to give their consent without a second thought and it seemed that most participants would have been happy to have their character's names or even their own names used in publication. Due to the nature of my questions in interviews, however, I use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of both the character and real names of players. Some questioning touches upon issues that are in violation of the Terms of Use and End-User License Agreement, and identification of a player could result in termination of their account. I should also note here the importance of determining the real name of a player for a research conducting a longitudinal study. Because accounts may be played by

friends or sold to strangers, it is critical that a researcher have some tie to the people with whom they are speaking. In one anomalous case, a female player was adamant about maintaining anonymity, finally consented to give her email, but then did not sign a consent form. Ultimately, I was told by another player that the female player did not appreciate my (female) presence as she did not actually believe I was a researcher.

Gender

Having set my research focus to avoid a study of gender, I was genuinely surprised to discover that this would be impossible. The stereotype is true: more men than women are in World of Warcraft (Castronova 2003: 4). What does this mean for a female player, or more personally, for a female researcher-player?

The first time a female player speaks in audio chat with a new group of players, she is generally greeted with one of two responses: a blatant declaration including "Oh my god, it's a girl!", or shocked silence. As Ysabel, an interviewee who identified herself as a female person with a female character, states, "being a female takes some people by surprise." Female players are often considered to be a free target for flirtation by male players and this has caused serious rifts when female players are offended by these forward actions. The flirtation element, though, can be encouraged by female players. The following public chat text depicts such a common instance with sexual connotation:

> [Guild] Saylormoon: still recovering from sat night lol
> [Guild] Punk: ill go easier next time saylor...
> [Guild] Punk: ;P
> [Guild] Saylormoon: lol

I was introduced to a potential female participant through another guild

member who had similar ranking in the guild hierarchy as this player. She had remained the only female player (or at least the only one to openly speak as such in verbal chat) in the guild for years. At guild events, I was treated differently by male players, who suspected she was jealous of my presence and who therefore shied away from me or rejected me for guild events while she was present.

I was forced to question whether I should engage only in group activities when she would not be present. This presented difficulties due to her high status in the hierarchy, which guaranteed her presence at most group events. I had initial concerns that players would think I was not one of them, that I was only playing for the research, when in fact she thought the opposite – that I was actually there only as a player, a potential threat to her status, and that I was not really doing research. While this situation is not necessarily the norm, being unexpectedly confronted with this issue forced me to rethink the navigation of power and gender in ethnography. As this field grows, it will be important to consider power and gender more critically as a central subject of study.

The Dynamic Virtual World

A major learning experience from this project was the dynamic aspect of human society both offline and online as this played out in the rise and fall of guilds. Between November 2008 and July 2009, I was a member of five guilds, all of which experienced a period of turmoil before disbanding (except the last, of which I remain a member). This situation is not simply bad luck, a conclusion I am able to come to based on my previous experience in World of Warcraft. This is a common occurrence for guilds: they rise, they peak, people are divided

between the lines of those who play a lot and those who do not, and finally guilds fail. This does not, of course, mean that the new guild arising from the ashes of the old guild cannot contain most of the previous membership. Some continuity of this form is very common. In the case of the first three guilds, much of the membership remained the same and the difference was in guild leadership, since players cannot oust the guild leader because the latter "owns" the name of the guild. I joined the fourth guild because it contained players I had known for a couple of years, allowing me to network more quickly in this environment. Finally, the fifth guild was one in which a real-world acquaintance of mine was an important member due to the fact that he played nearly every day of the week. Due to the changing nature of guilds, in future research I would rely on quantitative methods, such as a fairly large scale survey, to sample a greater number of guild members at any one time. This could be used to supplement qualitative methods exploring themes in a deeper way with a smaller interested group.

In addition to the dynamic aspect of guilds playing a role in the research process, I had to also account for game changes introduced during this time. An expansion pack was released by Blizzard Entertainment at the outset of my data collection period, in November 2008, making it necessary for me to spend some time leveling my character from level 70 to level 80 in order to reach endgame stability again. During this time, regardless of my progress, other players were progressing and were mostly unwilling to do anything but focus on gaining one more level. It took me until January 29, 2009 to again reach the endgame,

allowing me to continue examining fairness from the perspective of the endgame player, established now in the developer's expanded world.

CHAPTER 2

While players are relatively free to effect change on the game society, they are certainly constrained. Game developers act as that constraining authority, making design decisions that affect the world players engage in. It is game developers who create expansion products to keep long-term players interested and who give a character a place to go in the world, a quest to accomplish, and a means of moving in the world to a destination. Players' sense of fun and satisfaction in the game depends upon these constraints being carried out in a fair manner. While rule-breaking might be thought of as unfair to other players, in fact, this research shows that an overall sense of fun for the majority of players creates a sense of fairness.

Blizzard Entertainment hires artists, developers, storywriters, and other creative agents to design World of Warcraft in such a way that most customers are satisfied, and so that the game is able to attract a continual flow of new customers. Players need to be given a lot of goals to make a game meaningful and goals arise out of the game design; further, goals are made meaningful by the provision of means to measure players' in-game attainments/accomplishments (Costikyan 2006: 197). The design of a game is essentially based around constraints coded into it. In World of Warcraft, the character obeys gravity, falls into set categories for play-style, carries money in the form of gold/silver/copper, and has to find space for new items gathered within 5 containers (bags) of specified volume. Rules are necessary in games because they provide a structure in which the player can act, with appropriate motivations relating to that structure based on long term

and sustained meaning (Swink 2009: 98). While players are likely not thinking about how Blizzard acts to constrain their play on a regular basis in these terms, certainly players have expectations for developers. These expectations revolve around balance, with the overall balance of fun representing fairness. The delicate balances involved in this voluntary society – the benefits involved with playing certain classes, the opportunities available to players, and the investment required to achieve a self-measured level of success – will be examined below.

DEVELOPERS

Developers are the employees of a game publishing company, whose job is to maximize the play of potential customers. They design, code, and maintain the software that provides play. Because games inevitably involve a delicate balance between challenge and reward, and because players have the ability to sever their ties to a game at any time, the developer plays a key role in the proliferation of the game itself. The balance between work and play is written by a developer, and the possibilities made available for fun and fairness in-game are affected as a result of their decisions.

Developers institute what I have referred to already as coded constraint. Software is written to give the player choices, but these are finite and, thus, constrained. As a result, fairness may be navigated in local ways, as will be shown throughout this chapter and Chapter 3, but what lies beneath player-negotiated fairness is the actual written code of the game itself. Coded constraints both enable and disable freedom. They seem necessary to creating the sense of

play in a game, but they also force players to negotiate exchanges among themselves in unique, adaptive ways. It is critical, then, to examine player-negotiated senses of fairness as well as the written rules of play.

Probably the most basic coded constraint is that of movement. Virtual worlds need not be built under the constraint of gravity, and yet in World of Warcraft, character's movements are subject to it. A long fall from the top of a tower (without help from various spells and items) will result in death for a character. In general, movement in-game is achieved through using mainly six keyboard keys (W, A, S, D, Q and E) and the mouse buttons. This is a basic choice made by developers, but one which constrains what the player is able to do and how they might use the interface comfortably. For example, the spell-bar in the user interface would be set up according to where the hand position usually is. Spells most frequently used should potentially be placed on the hotkeys 1, 2, 3, or 4 to allow for minimal hand movement on the keyboard. In one instance I had shown a screenshot of my user interface to another player, who called me a noob (a gaming novice with undeveloped sense of etiquette or skill) for having a rarely-used spell placed in the prime location at “1”.

Developers as Gods

Relatively little ethnography has been done involving the developers of games as a complement to player-based studies. The closed-door policy of Blizzard Entertainment would not allow this. The company does not allow access to developers as a researcher. In this case, a complementary study would include an analysis of developer-answered forum queries as well as an attempt at

interaction during the annual Blizzcon. Blizzcon is a conference event bringing together fans and developers of Blizzard's games and includes the opportunity to attend a Q&A period with developers. Taylor (2006) attended a similar conference for EverQuest and found it to be ethnographically interesting as a complement to her online research due to her interaction with other players in-person and with developers.

The “developers as gods” model was developed significantly by Malaby (2006a), who performed ethnographic research in-person at the development studio of the virtual world known as Second Life. While Second Life is not a game per se, it is a virtual world, and one which has coded constraints instituted by developers. Even in Second Life, a virtual world that allows users to retain intellectual property rights over their virtual products, the developers continue to maintain supreme governance over the code (Malaby 2006a). Bartle (2006) takes this idea of supreme governance further, calling developers gods instead of governors. The developers have the ability to change the laws of physics in the game and they cannot be deposed by users, making them an external force with unique abilities (Bartle 2006).

This is not to say that developers create constraints in the absence of player pressure. Quite the opposite: players actively use Blizzard Entertainment's online forums as a means of voicing concerns to developers. Players act as “an (unpaid) quality assurance (QA) force” (Taylor 2006: 155). These concerns generally revolve around a call for balance in game-play and players, as we will later see, find ways to work around developers.

Developer Goals: The Balancing Act

The idea that denizens of the virtual world choose to be there, and that they may freely leave at any time, at least theoretically, forces the "powers that be" to continually provide a world that adapts to the needs and desires of these denizens. Developers have the challenge of creating a final product which is both challenging (frustrating) and fun (Swink 2009: 322), requiring a balance between a player's perceived work and play. Castronova's (2002) work has shown that people will pay money to be constrained in the virtual world and that people do not find fun in total freedom. People expect a challenge when they believe themselves to be involved in a game, and challenges arise out of constraints placed on the kinds of choices a player can make, creating goals. Players of MMOs also have a social dynamic available to them that requires that the non-social challenges be limited. In a game, obstacles can promote well-being in ways that they do not in the real world. This is among the reasons that players might choose time in a virtual world over the real world. Obstacles in the virtual world have lower physical stakes. We might concede that emotional stakes could be quite high for a dedicated player, but we cannot truly compare the need for nourishment, safe housing, etc. in the real world to that in the virtual world.

The idea of fun is central to any discussion of work and play in virtual worlds. Developers must take fun very seriously in order to achieve the proper balance of work and play that will keep players in the game. At the same time, this balance is continually negotiated by players in the face of developer changes. Rewards provide one means of communicating to a player what is worth their

time, lending a dimension of fun to activities that might otherwise be thought of as work (Swink 2009: 180). The issue of balancing work and fun dominates in discussions about player classes, as classes are heavily categorized and the aim of players and developers alike is to make each class equally fun so that no one class has an unfair "fun-ness" advantage. Developers need to perform their role in an adaptive way in order to satisfy the changing needs of the player base (Todd 2007: 123). In fact, one of the major findings of the thesis is that a major motivator of social action, discontent, and one might even say activism, is directed at the distribution and redistribution of fun. Players perform social action through seizing the means of fun-making or fun production from developers.

CODED CONSTRAINTS

Class Balancing

A major and constant concern of players is the ability to play a class as well as, and with the same fun factor as, other classes. As mentioned in the Introduction, the classes available to players are as follows: Shaman, Warrior, Druid, Warlock, Mage, Paladin, Rogue, Priest, Hunter, and Death Knight. Not all classes are meant to perform the same actions. The roles of the classes can be broken down into Tank, Healer, Melee damage-dealer (DPS), and Ranged damage-dealer (DPS). The tank is needed in every raid, and may be played by a Warrior, Paladin, or Death Knight, though each of these classes have unique abilities and gear requirements, causing some difficulty in balancing how well a particular class might be able to withstand damage from a monster. Likewise, a

healer is also needed in every raid and this role may be performed by the Shaman, Druid, Paladin, or Priest. Again, not all classes even heal in the same way. Some classes are able to deliver greater amounts of healing in a short time to a single target, while others have the ability to heal many targets at once for a lesser amount per person. Similar situations arise for the DPS (damage-dealing) classes as well. By coding this in, developers have forced players to make a significant choice in their style of play, and in the demand for this style. One player noted that she played a tanking class as her main character because it was less competitive than DPS, noting that tanking was simple "by the numbers". This means that if a tank has the proper armor and weapons, information analysed and presented online, the actions a tank must make in battle are relatively straightforward. Balancing DPS classes, then, is important for Blizzard as players need DPS classes in a group.

Castronova (2005b) states that developers may get blamed for being unfair in an instance when they are unable to control outcomes, for example for class scarcity due to players choosing not to play a class. Players in my experience do indeed argue that it is up to developers to make all classes equally fun to play by an equal number of people. While Castronova (2005b) predicts eventual balance due to those in more popular classes leaving to avoid competition for rewards, just as Ysabel did, this is an explanation that one might expect from an economist. In terms of competition, I would suggest that in fact a more relevant factor might well be fun. Castronova does not seem to take into account the time that players invest into an endgame character. This necessary commitment, coded into the

game, will prevent players from leaving a character behind because the player feels a sense of deep (sometimes emotional) investment in that character. This is part of what makes World of Warcraft worthwhile, or – one might say – fun for players. So, the consequence of leaving a character behind is a loss of fun for the player, leading to the sense of unfairness that is directed at developers for failing to balance classes.

Binding Items

By causing prestigious items to become bound to a single owner, developers constrain items in a way that affects nearly every decision a player will make. When this occurs, we say that the item is "soulbound", meaning that it cannot be traded, exchanged, or sold to other players, and may only be worn by the player to which it is soulbound, sold to a non-player character, or destroyed. Items may fall under the following categories:

- **Bind on Equip (BoE)**: The item may be traded, exchanged, or sold until it has been worn by a player, at which point the item becomes soulbound.
- **Bind on Pickup (BoP)**: The item is immediately soulbound when it is received in the character's inventory.
- **Bind to Account (BtA)**: The item may only be exchanged through characters on a single player's account.
- **Normal**: Items are never soulbound and may be freely traded, exchanged, or sold.

Soulbinding items places a restriction on the ability to distribute items. Items already rarely appearing as an item drop are rarer because they can not only be

used by a low number of class types, but can only be used by one character in total for the duration of the item's existence. This reduces the ability of a player with both high and low level characters to use wealth to equip lower-level characters with the best gear. Soulbinding is a constraint that reduces the overall accessibility of items through spending gold, instead requiring time spent rather than gold spent. This latter point is one way of reducing offline buying and selling of virtual items and gold. Players are forced to rely upon each other because rare items are not in circulation. On the other hand, the constraints placed on the time of players forces the casual player to consider buying gold in order to remain at least moderately equipped. Soulbinding is the major reason for the creation of loot distribution systems.

Loot Distribution

Loot refers to the armor, weapons, raw materials, gold, and so on, that are made available to players by completing quests and killing monsters. Games such as World of Warcraft save the best rewards for those that group with others; they engage a system that forces teamwork to achieve the highest goals (Castronova 2007: 128). Loot is typically placed into a character's inventory by right-clicking on the monster's corpse and then left-clicking on the items available, which can then be viewed in the character's bags. When a player has killed a monster in a group situation, turn-taking normally occurs and is coded into the process. For example, if Player 1 and 2 work together to kill a monster, the first corpse will only reveal items when Player 1 right-clicks on the corpse. The second monster killed will reveal items only when Player 2 right-clicks on the corpse. The third

monster's corpse would then be accessible to Player 1 again, and so on. In this case, Player 1 can receive all items from the first and third monsters, even if the items would suit Player 2 better. Players are expected to negotiate this by talking about loot and by using the constraints available to them to further allocate loot.

Loot distribution systems are methods of allocating items to appropriate recipients in a group situation. The chosen mode of loot distribution can have high stakes and high consequences for a given player. Developers have coded in a number of variations of loot distribution for both parties and raids. The raid leader, a role given to the player who began inviting others to the raid, has the ability to change the coded loot distribution. The raid leader is expected to maintain the trust of the players in the raid through exhibiting fairness in loot distribution. This is critical to a raid running smoothly. The following modes of loot distribution are presented:

- **Group Loot**: This is the default loot mode in groups. When a relatively rare item appears, a pop-up will query the player as to whether they would like to roll the dice for “Need”, “Greed”, or whether they would like to “Pass”. Players who choose need will be assigned a random number from 1-100, with the highest number winning the item. If no players selected “Need”, those who selected “Greed” will undergo the same process. If all players Pass, the item remains available to all players present and can be right-clicked by anyone. Items that are not rare are received in turn by players.

- **Master Looter**: The raid leader is placed in charge of all loot distribution above a certain level of rarity. They choose who gets what and may rely upon other systems to make this choice. All players may see items by right-clicking on a monster but cannot receive them by then left-clicking on the item.
- **Free For All**: All items are made available to all players. Anyone may right-click on a monster to obtain loot.
- **Round Robin**: All players receive their turn at looting, with no threshold for item rarity.
- **Need Before Greed**: Players who are unable to equip an item, such as a plate metal chest-piece and a leather-wearing hunter, automatically pass through this system.

In addition, the raid leader may specify the item rarity in which loot distribution is initiated, known as the threshold, another situation requiring trust in the leader. For example, normally in raids items with their title coloured green, known as "Uncommon" items, are received by the player whose turn it is to loot a particular corpse. This turn-taking is again a coded constraint, so that normally players take turns in rotation receiving items from monsters killed by their group. The consequences of *not* instituting this coded constraint could be the dissatisfaction of the majority of players as it allows for the few to wrongly obtain the most goods, as may happen with Free For All. By contrast, items with their title coloured blue or purple, for Rare or Epic, are almost always distributed via the master looter as they are so rare that mistakes in allocation would be felt

deeply. Time limits are placed upon the coded Need/Greed/Pass pop-up screen in order to further constrain loot distribution. These forms of constraint, however, may be circumvented by player-created loot systems.

Included under the heading of loot are recipes for players to increase their profession skills. Having rare recipes and being able to make them for not only guildmates, but the general server population is important to a player's overall reputation as committed and willing to help others and "it matters who has access to plans first" [Ysabel].

Public vs. Private Loot Distribution

The Dragon-Kill Points (DKP) system is a private money system instituted by guilds as a way of measuring a player's loyalty and commitment. It is used in determining how group-owned resources are allocated and is one way in which players seize the means of fun production out of the hands of developers. At the outset, it should be stated that items appearing in a raid are only available to that raid and will disappear over time, so BoP items cannot be returned to later. They must be dealt with immediately. As a result, guilds have created a local currency system in assigning points to players for various activities pertaining to a raid. A player may receive points for being on-time, prepared, for helping to kill monsters, for attempting to kill monsters, for the units of time spent in the raid, and for staying late to continue the raid. Points obtained by players are usually made public to guild members via guild websites. Each DKP system within a guild is isolated from all other guilds so that points cannot be spent outside of the guild in which they were obtained. DKP is based on a form of social credit, or the

labour put into the guild's benefit by an individual player; it encourages participation, reliability, and cooperation (Mortensen 2006: 404).

The loot distribution systems already coded into the game have some consequences that make a DKP system attractive to players. While the consequences of Free For All are rather obvious, that players can greedily gather all goods if they are fast enough, the subtle nuances of the other systems may be less obvious. In Round Robin, if a rare item drops that is BoP, one player has the ability to receive this item and simply sell it back to a non-player character for a very low amount, causing a player who could have used such item to suffer a great time loss. If a BoE item drops, it is rather unfair that a player receives it simply because it was their turn because the players present at the event are felt to have invested sufficient time as a collective that the rewards should be distributed always within the group first, and beyond the group for individual profit second. This is remedied somewhat in Group Loot. However, there is no mechanism to determine whether a player truly needed an item. Other players may inspect the armor of a character and advise accordingly, but there is no way to stop a player from hitting the Need roll button:

> Someone can show up one night and be lucky with rolling.
> [Razzy]
>
> We have found that sometimes people who raid every week are getting gear picked off of them by people who raid once a month.
> [Daisy]

Need Before Greed forces players unable to equip an item to pass on it, meaning that, for example, if a player cannot use swords they are unable to receive a sword

in this way. This method, however, does not take into consideration how the chosen talent specialization of a player might be affected by the statistics on an item. For example, if two characters are able to use a sword, but one character will benefit more in his or her play-style through using the sword, this character could still lose the item to another character. This would cause the fun of all players in a group to be reduced due to the "waste" of an item not being used to its maximum benefit. Master Looter certainly increases control over this circumstance because all players do not have equal opportunity to randomly roll, but trust must be placed in the hands of one person with a time constraint, and poor decisions can be made. Trust in a raid leader is important, as Feint describes:

> In the end I have final say who it goes to. Everybody I raid with they trust me...they know I'm going to make the right decision...I will pass on myself if I know it's an upgrade for somebody else... If it's a [pick-up group of unaffiliated players] it's tough to get loyalty and a lot of faith in the person who's deciding what's going to happen.

In the master looter system, it is possible for the master looter to place an item in his or her own inventory accidentally. Thus, the developer-constrained loot distribution systems present the problem of reducing fun because they do not anticipate, or provide modes for dealing with, deciding who should receive an item if more than one person can use an item. Due to the time constraint of making these decisions in a raid, players have found it necessary to circumvent these developer constraints and have created DKP as a means of fun production where loot distribution is concerned.

DKP then is a representation of the good qualities of a player with respect

to their in-guild actions. In addition, possible items are generally well inventoried. For example, if a given monster might drop one of twenty items, usually each of these items are assigned a point cost based on their rarity and the amount of upgrade they might give, and are assigned a primary and secondary class that could receive the items. In this way, players do constrain themselves more by assigning approved recipients, but avoid greater problems in loot distribution failure. This results in a much greater level of fun as items are used by those whom can achieve maximum benefit. The faster a character can kill or heal in a raid, the greater the fun for the group as a whole. With DKP, the player with the highest number of points (ie: the best reputation for being loyal, available, helpful, etc.) can receive the best items relevant to them. An ideal loot system is described by Jed:

> To some extent it should reward people that are actually putting the time and effort in...assuming that's equal it should give everyone else the same chance to get whatever they want.

Because DKP points are not transferable among guilds, players are kept in line by forcing them to adhere to rules of social cohesion because the consequence is major – a loss of all currency accrued for rewards.

The DKP system cultivates reciprocity among members by keeping value isolated within the small group; it acts as a form of credentialism also within that group, marking players with a large cache of points as both experienced and reliable (Malone 2007: 6). DKP, though taking a number of specific forms, generally is used in guilds dominated by endgame players, so the problem with studies of DKP are they generally leave out casual guilds, or those on the

periphery. As such, fairness in loot distribution might result in unfair perceptions of casual players as lacking the qualities that the DKP system imbues a player with: cooperation, reliability, and so on.

A similar system of note is the SKG (Suicide Kings) system, the DKP-like loot distribution system used in the fifth guild of my research. While players do not accrue points in this system in terms of a numerical score associated with their name, players are certainly and obviously given an indication of their ranking in terms of loot. Jed explains this system:

> In guild runs...we use SKG...it is basically just a list and whoever is at the top of the list for an item they want they get the item and then move to the bottom of the list...You start at the bottom of the list [when you join the guild].

The distinction of a member at the bottom of the list, if they are not well known to the guild, is likely one of being rather new to the circle and less worthy of trust. In truth, the placement of a new player at the bottom of the list says quite clearly: we do not trust you enough to gain loot over the preference of our longstanding members. Players in an established guild are not ready to trust their overall fun to newcomers. New players must work their way up and show their loyalty before being entrusted with the rewards of the raid because the fun of the guild as a whole progresses by retaining players who use raid items in guild raids.

Real Money Trading and Developers

However important the acquisition of items are for the endgame player, one fact is clear: in World of Warcraft, players have no right to intellectual property, they do not own the character they took time to level, and they retain no rights over in-game goods. Gold farming has a significant effect on a server for

regular players. Often, in the course of a session of farming, gold farmers will acquire items of relatively low value. Gold farmers have been known to place these for auction on the auction house at a reduced rate, thus removing value from those who are not gold farmers and would otherwise price such an item higher. They reduce the profit available to the average player. Blizzard Entertainment has made gold selling a violation of the Terms of Service and released a memo on the detrimental effects of gold buying. Companies that sell gold often hack into, and overtake, player accounts and use these accounts to obtain gold; these companies exploit the game, causing game stability issues and reducing the ability of Blizzard Entertainment to provide a stable experience for players; and inflation results from the monopoly that gold farmers may obtain over items (Blizzard 2009).

Blizzard Entertainment has been mentioned as one company that is willing to go to great pains to stop RMT (Castronova 2005b: 165), as it is in direct violation of the End-User License Agreement (EULA) to allow access to one's account by another party. One participant had bought gold and did not tell me until later interactions outside of the recorded interview due to possible sanctions against him. To developers, real money trading is inherently unfair because it violates the rules they created. As some players stated:

> It ruins the economy...brings real money into the fake world...Farmers manipulate item prices to get more gold to get more real money.
> [Razzy]

> I know it's against the Terms of Use and I think that's part of the reason I would never do it...they're risking wasting their money in doing it.
> [Jed]

> It's against the rules. i would have no problem with it if blizz decided it was ok and built a system in there for it; but right now, the game is not balanced for that...if the game took into account people buying gold, things would cost more gold in game i think.
> [Daisy, chat text]
>
> The guys who buy that gold and think they're on par, I mean you don't respect your character; you don't respect anything in the game.
> [Feint]

Because developers act as gods, rule violation is reprehensible and the consequences follow in scale. RMT breaks quite possibly the most important rule – for developers it breaks the fantasy membrane, bringing the idea of the game into question. As a result, players determined to be involved in gold farming, gold buying, or account buying have their accounts terminated with no recourse. The developer's perspective does not anticipate the importance of community from the player's perspective. Ironically, because community is so important, some players consider RMT to be "fair" because it allows them to participate more fully in the collective fun of the game.

In contrast to the developer perspective, in my research I found Real Money Trading (RMT) to be both fair and unfair from the player's perspective. In 2006, Castronova estimated that one third of all players in virtual worlds were engaging in RMT, but that as many players wanted RMT eliminated. In the case of this research, only one of the seven recorder interviewees admitted to purchasing gold, doing so only after a considerable amount of time was spent chatting both inside and outside of World of Warcraft. The pervasiveness of RMT has resulted in an often higher dollar exchange rate on virtual currencies than real

third world currencies (Castronova 2005b:149). Language concerning RMT in informal discourse with players is generally negative towards the producers rather than the consumers. Most players do agree that RMT is in violation of the rules of the game, and is thus a form of cheating: “It's wrong, it really is...The whole point of the leveling process is to learn how to play the class” [Razzy]. However, engaging in RMT seems to be an emergent form of rebellion against the unfairness coded into the game by developers:

> It used to irritate me back in the beginning when it was new...If that's the worse thing a person does in the world then i think i can live with that...It's for immediate satisfaction, instant gratification...whatever, it's your money.
> [Ysabel]
>
> In the case of gold and leveled accounts I'm sure they think it's worth saving the time to spend their money and play the way they want to.
> [Jed]

It should be noted that the descriptor “cheating” is more often applied to the producer, the gold farmer, rather than the consumer.

For players, the amount of time needed to truly be the best on a server is unfair and impossible to obtain. Hardcore players take further measures against casual players, for example by artificially raising prices during certain times of day and days of the week when casual players are predominantly online. The fact that each player pays the same amount of initial and monthly fee for the software as any other player causes casual players to feel alienated when this investment does not achieve the same results as more hardcore players. According to Ysabel, “In an MMO, the entire universe should be designed so that anybody who puts in eventually the same amount of time, and develops the same amount of skill,

should be able to do the exact same things."

Thus, the necessary time commitment coded into the game by developers, as was directly seen with respect to rare BoP items, is unfair to the casual player because all players cannot have the same level of fun. It is in rebellion against the coded constraints that the player would engage in RMT. Players feel it as a personal affront that they are unable to engage in the symbolic value system in World of Warcraft without engaging in RMT. These values include: display, reputation, status, and aesthetic appearance (Martin 2008). Players weigh the unfairness of the constraint over the unfairness of generally breaking rules. What emerges is a striving towards the equality of fun, with players ultimately aiming to achieve the same fun per hour as other players paying the same amount to Blizzard Entertainment. This is why the idea of ninjas reducing the fun of others in a group by taking goods and the idea of destroying items when people hoard DKP points offends the sense of fairness: it reduces the potential of fun for others in the game. Developers make the game fun for an individual but do not anticipate the degree to which social engagement is in itself fun for players and are thus continually behind player-created forms of fun. The justice of fun for all is privileged over other forms of justice, and fair players aim to increase the fun of others as well as themselves where possible.

Fun is the focus of distribution, redistribution, social action, and rebellion by casual players against developers and hardcore players. Fun is increased by some constraints and by sociability so that players are valued or criticized for the extent to which they contribute to fun.

CHAPTER 3

I engaged my overarching research theme, fairness, by looking at the in-game economy and addressed the creation and distribution of currency and wealth. Specifically, I investigated the ways in which players chose, as a small group in a guild, to dole out rewards among guild members in group events. Loot distribution systems were coded into the game by Blizzard Entertainment, but they are also created by players in the endgame in response to coded systems being viewed as unfair. Blizzard's codes do not take into account the moral values of players, such as overall trustworthiness, honesty, time commitment, and skill. The Dragon Kill Points system is an illuminating example of a player-generated loot distribution system that aims to reward such moral values.

The dynamic society within World of Warcraft is continually reinterpreted and acted on by players, as is shown through the development of the Dragon Kill Points system, and is voluntary in the strict sense of the word. We could argue that a time investment of 142 days over three years, as one of my participants had contributed, is borderline-compulsive and skews the meaning of voluntary. Nevertheless, the real world consequences of choosing another virtual world or none at all are slight whereas real world migration from society can be life-altering in its real world expense, cultural change, and so on. Given, then, that membership in World of Warcraft is voluntary, it is also interesting that players are willing to pay real world money in order to maintain membership in such a society. The monthly fees are fifteen US dollars and come with technical support and consistently new content to keep players interested. One player noted the

entertainment value in WoW for that monthly fee:

> My husband and I both play so it gives us something to do that's cheap, um, $30 a month for two people to do something whenever they want. We're both geeks.
> [Ysabel]

In terms of the society itself, research in World of Warcraft is interesting because it is a small-scale society in which people are able to effect real change in the local economy, to choose how they want to organize themselves, and to distribute wealth according to locally-created means.

INVESTMENT

I focused on endgame players, people that engage in a significant time and monetary investment to maintain their play. Playing casually, 3 nights a week or less on average, it took me about nine months overall to reach level 80. Some of my participants had spent 3600 hours over the course of four years playing; this works out to around 20 hours per week on average, not taking holidays or breaks into account. Most participants had played actively for three years or more, with the majority of time spent in endgame. Along with the monthly fee for World of Warcraft of $15 USD, an initial investment of about $100 CAN in the actual game installation DVDs is necessary. This number rises with each expansion pack released.

The kind of play that occurs in the end-game is increasingly group-oriented. To achieve the greatest achievements coded into the game, you must not only interact with others, but play with them in a coordinated fashion, with scheduled group events being the main priority. Because a player often needs to

group with others, it can be very difficult to consider playing for just an hour (Taylor 2006: 36) and a more lengthy time investment is necessary in order to get the required group elements together. What emerged as a particularly interesting issue for my research is the interplay between the emphasis on the collective in endgame and the desires of individuals who have invested their real world resources in their characters, both contributing to the overall sense of fun for each player.

CURRENCY

The intersection between real and virtual currencies is one issue that comes to the forefront in examinations of fairness in the virtual world, particularly because currency is exchanged by the individual and the collective, though in different ways. In studying an MMO such as World of Warcraft, we have two general categories of money to think about:

- **"real" money**: the currency used to buy the game DVDs, to pay the monthly fee, and as one part of the real money trading currency.
- **virtual world currency**: in World of Warcraft, this is gold and the smaller denominations of silver and copper; this money is used to buy armor, weapons, food, and services in the game.

Gold is obtained by killing monsters, performing certain tasks requested of you by non-player characters, and using your skills to produce things for other players. Sometimes, gold is obtained through online purchases using real world money, or real money trading (RMT). Real money trading is a process that involves the

following steps: a player may go online to a website and use her credit card to purchase gold from a website, much like other forms of online shopping, where the gold is then transferred in-game to this person's character. Gold suppliers are referred to in-game as “gold farmers”; a distinction is made between the “farming” of average players in order to obtain resources for personal use or sale and the resource exploitation of the gold farmer who does not interact with other players normally. Gold farmers typically work 12 hour shifts and exploit the repetitive nature of the game to obtain the most amount of gold in the least amount of time on a character. This is not a lucrative job in North America, as was shown by Julian Dibbell (2006), a journalist who wanted to see what sort of income he could make at gold farming. Instead, gold farming generally occurs in lower-income nations like China.

THE FLOW OF VALUE

Research on cyberspace in general, and virtual worlds in particular, had a general tendency to dichotomize the experience throughout the 1990s, be it the interaction between work and play, the virtual and the real, and the online and offline. Edward Castronova's (2005b) more recent work emphasizes the porosity of the line dividing the synthetic world and the real world. For Castronova (2005b:147), the synthetic world has a membrane surrounding it, but this membrane allows value to flow between the synthetic and the real. My research further supports the idea of the constant blending between the two spheres.

FAIRNESS

Fairness is a concept, like beauty, that is important, much discussed, and yet very difficult to define. Strong human emotions such as love, anger, and joy can arise out of fairness negotiations. It is, in short, a cultural concept key to understanding the motivations, structures, and dynamic elements of a society. Fairness is a sense of rightness in a local context. I am interested in how players are defining the rules of fairness within the local community, insofar as they have the power to do so under game constraints.

In World of Warcraft, we can examine fairness as it plays out in three interrelated groupings:

- **Fair Actions:** the decisions players choose to make and follow through, whether restricted by the game or otherwise.
- **Fair Players:** the qualities that are considered to imbue a person with a reputation for fairness, informed by the expectations people have of others.
- **Fair Guilds:** the "proper" management of group-owned resources and the proper wielding of power in a voluntary association of players grouping together to achieve common goals.

Money, in both forms previously mentioned – the real and the virtual - is central to player definitions of fairness and provides a common link between these three areas.

Fair Actions

Considerations of fairness are central to players' decision-making in World

of Warcraft. One example of this is evident in pricing of sellable items. Often, while performing daily quests, raiding, or carrying out other activities in the game, characters may receive items that they are unable to use, but that they may sell for profit. This could include such goods as raw materials to be used by players with the required professions, or armor not useable or considered to be an upgrade by a player. When these items are not bind on pickup (BoP), they may be sold or traded to another player. In terms of fair sales, players emphasize the importance of honesty over misrepresentation. For example, players may claim more interest in their product than actually has been expressed in order to incite a buyer to pay more in publicly advertised sales.

Players have two options when it comes to selling items publicly. They may place the item for auction at the Auction House, or they may advertise the item in a public trade chat channel. Most participants seemed to opt for the former when selling goods and regarded pricing as one way of exhibiting fair play. Players expect to receive a marginal profit for a raw material item on the auction house, just as they expect others to price their items accordingly. Ysabel stated:

> I get really annoyed when somebody undercuts me. When a fair price return would be 75 gold cost to make, posted for 100 gold for example, it is not fair when someone undercuts for lower than the cost of [materials]. This kind of person is trusting [a program not developed by Blizzard] to tell them what to price something at. If everybody tries to help each other then everybody gets money because you try to keep [the economy] stabilized.

An item that costs 70 gold in raw materials is acceptably sold for 100 gold on the auction house as a finished, manufactured product. Players who would price the same item at 60 gold, thereby undercutting the other sellers, are considered to be

unfair. While that player pricing the item lower is accepting a drastic hit to their profits, the effect of their "deal" is an artificial drop in price that fails to account for the typical pricing of other sellers. Players do not seem to want this type of undercutting on the whole, even though it might benefit a single player wanting that item, because it affects more people negatively over time. This relates directly to an emphasis on achieving the greatest fun for the greatest number of players.

Alternatively, pricing is often raised by players on Thursdays and Fridays in response to increased traffic, and thus demand, on weekends. This is seen as unfair, and not only by those who are only available to play on weekends. In fact, an unemployed player who was available to play most of the week expressed an adamant distaste for this sort of practice. The major objection to this pricing arrangement comes back to the idea of the amount of investment necessary to maintain a balance of fun. Players have a finite amount of real world time and money, and those with less time to play have a lower quality experience when they are required to do more work per "unit" of fun. In this case, the increased price of an item on Friday means that the weekend player must do more in-game work on Saturday to obtain the gold needed, in comparison to the in-game work of a player earlier in the week to obtain the lower priced item. Likewise, the in-game work of a mid-week player is worth considerably more if resources are saved and placed for auction on the weekend. The time investment is worth less to the weekend player, and the money investment goes towards increased in-game work, making this unfair. The player with less time has to pay more gold for

resources to maintain an endgame play-style, driving demand for time-saving RMT sales.

Fair Players

As was previously indicated, goods may be obtained by players whose only benefit to that player is in selling the item. While the Auction House or public trade advertisement is a possible method of removing this unwanted item from a player's inventory, there is one more option: to give the item as a gift. Most participants play to be social; they play to maintain relationships with people they know in the real world or in WoW. One woman plays with her husband and has switched between game genres with a group of friends, some she's met in real life and some she has not. Some play to meet people because they find themselves isolated in the real world, especially due to unemployment. Ysabel stated that she was playing 50-80 hours per week on average due to her unemployment. The relationships between people in World of Warcraft affect fairness expectations in others. Fair players are willing to be a little bit selfless and are expected to be humble about this. Fair players are described as:

> Sincere, quick learner, is helpful... good sport...same thing you'd look for in a sports team or poker night.
> [Ysabel]

> Ppl are fair if they can judge with a certainty what they need to upgrade but also being able to judge if that object is a very minor upgrade for one but a major upgrade for another.
> [Corporal]

They should help others when their skills allow it and avoid taking rewards when items are statistically better for others.

Initially, I assumed that buying gold, characters and other items using real

money would always be considered unfair by the majority of players, due to my experience in game with hearing people discuss gold farming in a very negative light. However, the industry is certainly in the millions, or possibly billions, of US dollars per year, suggesting that what people feel about it and what they actually do might just be different things. I did not engage in gold-buying myself as I did not feel that an investigation of such a process was central to the research. Rather, I was interested in players' perceptions of the process and their own experience with RMT and its aftermath. Some participants noted the negative effects of real money trading, stating that it ruins the economy, it brings real money into the fake world, and it causes inflation of item prices. One player chose third-party programs (not developed by Blizzard) with less pricing data to make her own fair pricing decisions, avoiding the more detailed add-on that she considered to be of use to gold farmers. While ruining the economy might be considered rather unfair for most players, it seems that the unfairness inherent in the necessary time/money investment in maintaining play more than made up for this. RMT was justified in this way: people with jobs, family, and so on, do not have enough time in game to attend group events and to earn the amount of gold necessary to better their characters. Because these people are paying the same monthly fee as anyone else, it is thought to be acceptable for them to play catch-up, when they've justified the real-world cost to themselves. It is not for players to tell others what to do because the $15/month investment has been made. For Darklord, an unfair player is:

> Anyone who thinks they have the right to tell someone else what to do; we all pay fifteen bucks a month, end of story...Anyone who plays this game and plays it reasonably well, should be able to play it as they choose.

Fairness in the game reflects ideas about fairness from the player's real world experience. The act of paying for a service justifies the idea that players can "play outside of the rules" because this is the way to achieve maximum value for their dollar. In this instance, maximum value equates to maximum levels of fun across all endgame players. Likewise, in a market economy we expect to receive maximum value for our dollar and rule-bending is justifiable to other community members (not in a position of authority over the rule-bender) when it occurs within these parameters.

Fair Guilds

Most of what a player does in the endgame is social. Many comments from players emphasize this point:

> I play to, um, I keep playing to hang out with people...I'm social but I'm also focused if it's like a group project.
> [Ysabel]

> Mostly I play this game to like hang out with people um make friends...I play this game to be social and if you're not in a guild you miss out on that.
> [Razzy]

> The reason I like being in guilds is it gets lonly not being in them and teh guilds I am in are with ppl whove Ive been in guilds with previously.
> [Corporal, chat text]

Trust is built among guild members and people are willing to do things for others with the knowledge that they will be able to get help when they need it. They donate time, gold, and other items to each other; and usually are not doing the same for random players. For example, Jed mentioned that he frequently donates

“Money, items, time, whatever, depends on the person”. The people that I interviewed had been guild members of their current guilds from 3 months to 3 years. Players in general don't measure their friendships differently between the real world and the virtual world. Anything that you would do for your friend who lives down the street, you would do for a friend in the virtual world. It's about time spent with people, rather than meeting face to face.

Fairness involves a player only taking items to which they are entitled. A “ninja” is the opposite of such a player. The ninja is a name for one who, in a group, takes items that are not suitable for their character to use or were not otherwise supposed to gather, to be later sold at profit for the benefit of that individual only. The fact that players enjoy being social doesn't mean they aren't looking out for themselves or that it is all fun and games; social aspects keep them coming day in and day out, but people still ultimately hope to progress as players and can be very serious and focused during group events. This is not necessarily an irreconcilable problem. Keith Hart (2005b: 108) points out that we are “all individual and social at the same time and the two are inseparable in our experience”, with these inseparable but distinguishable in constant negotiation. Resource allocation in guilds is done through loot distribution systems created for raids and through the guild bank. The guild bank has a finite number of storage units, so allocation must occur in order for the bank to accumulate better goods. Guild officer control over the guild bank is actually considered fair since officers are presumed to be more trustworthy than the average player and “so people don't sell [guild-owned] recipes [without donating profits back to] the guild” [Razzy].

Players are continually aiming for special, expensive items, with most participants considering themselves gold spenders instead of gold savers, and resource allocation plays a role in the ability of a player to obtain such rare goods.

While the individual certainly benefits from social events, player motivation seems to emphasize collective progress. Most players mentioned that they strive for self-sufficiency, meaning that they want to avoid buying materials from others to make products or requiring the help of the guild bank. For example, players note that:

> It's also useful to make your own items without having to spend money on somebody else's...I don't like having to buy something from somebody else.
>
> [Ysabel]

> For the most part I don't buy things from the auction house I just sell them.
>
> [Razzy]

They do not usually sell the products they make at endgame, preferring to give away items without expecting a tip in return, a way of lending their unique skills to help others. This was especially true among guildmates or between friends, whether in the same guild or not.

> I usually vendor what Icraft unless its an upgrade or a guildee/friend needs it...I help them with instances and quests and knowledge and they do the same...And we help eacother out wit hmaterials.
>
> [Corporal, chat text]

> Depending on the piece I will either guild bank it or I will give it away to somebody if I think they can use it or I will just vendor it...We all do it back and forth...we do it because we want to, not because we have to...If somebody needs a type of gear and I'm able to make it...I will put it in the mail all gift wrapped and such...If I call you a friend I will basically give you what you need.
>
> [Feint]

In fact, most players spread out their skills among friends so that they can be self-sufficient as a smaller group within the guild or blended between guilds. Some of the types of things done for guild members and friends include: buying in-game birthday cake for player's birthdays, making bags for friends who start up the game, performing transmutation (turning a water-based item into a fire-based item) with a limit of once per 24 hours, giving gold to buy a first mount or a set of rare armor, buying items for friends up to 3000 gold, giving gems to friends. Doing these types of activities made players feel good, or they would do it out of trust:

> It's kind of the same thing as being able to be like, “Oh I can't afford dinner.” This week, I will pick up the cheque and you can buy me next week. That carries into the game with people you actually trust. It's a feel good feeling, against the jerk-like qualities of people on the internet caused by anonymity.
>
> [Ysabel]

> It's my personality...and the ability to put a smile on somebody's face...I'm a firm believer in the more you help your fellow man the better off you are.
>
> [Feint]

These activities add up to an overall economy of fun. A fair player is, among other things, someone with an appreciation of silliness for its own sake, something previously referenced in the language of WoW, a chat dialogue full of jokes and

sarcasm. A fair player is also a player who is giving for the pure enjoyment of the act. Most players do things for the pure pleasure of the result. This is not a sensual pleasure, but the pleasure that results from maintaining the "pureness" of fun.

Most of the best endgame items are distributed through guilds because they are obtained while doing guild events requiring ten or twenty-five players performing a coordinated activity for a few hours at a time. The stakes around loot distribution are important due to the process of an item to becoming soulbound. Soulbound items are worn, stored, or destroyed, so handing out these kinds of items in a fair manner is critical and reflects back upon the perceived fairness of a guild. In groups where not all members are from the same guild, the coded system is generally used. The problem with this method is that there is no monitoring of a player's selection until after the fact. Players make decisions by themselves and these decisions cannot be revoked once made, so an item may not go to the player who can use it the most because the choice was not made as a group.

In guild-only, or mainly guild-based events requiring 10 or 25 players, known as raids, the stakes are higher, but trust is also greater. Obtaining a higher rank in a guild, and thus a higher level of responsibility is possible through many means, all of which seem to reward the commitment of a player to the group:

> Some of them were based solely on time [+1 rank after intervals of a couple months]. If you participated in things in general. I find usually it's the same people who know each other, so if you just ended up being around enough and were continually helping people and the officers knew that they could depend on you without you losing your mind, overtime you would end up becoming an officer.
>
> [Ysabel]

> Being around and actually participating in the guild.
> [Jed]

> Guild involvement, what you do, what you bring, how you interact, how when an issue arises you deal with it.
> [Feint]

Say, for example, in a given raid over four hours, 10-15 items become available to players. Out of the twenty-five players, not everyone can win. Further, items have statistics associated with them that help only certain kinds of characters, so some may receive three items, while the majority receive none. Loot distribution systems work to make the distribution of these rare items fair, thus avoiding "loot drama".

LOOT DISTRIBUTION AND LOCAL CURRENCY

Players have noted that they would rather have the items they want than a cache of gold, so the DKP system is one way of organizing the distribution of items to players. Rewarding players for their overall helpfulness seems to dominate in importance:

> I think it's more fair on a personal level and not just a technical level...Personally I like rewarding loyalty because it makes people want to stay.
> [Ysabel]

DKP can be earned for appearing on time, for being ready, and for staying late. It encourages participation, reliability, and cooperation and rewards the individual for collective progress. In this system players know when they will receive an

item based on numbers. No blame can be placed on any individual officer, there should be no coercion by guildmates to pass on an item to someone else, and luck does not factor in here, so a new member who has not put a lot of time in will not win items. This system, however, is only fair when everyone can raid the same amount, otherwise those who attend more will always have the upper hand. Players may also hoard points for vanity items, causing items of use to become destroyed:

> In a DKP system you end up eventually with people who hoard their points and let other items go unused.
> [Ysabel]

> In dkp ppl have been known to hoarde up there dkp and use it all atonce on w.e they want not allowing others t oget upgrades.
> [Corporal, chat text]

Corporal refers to an instance where a player chooses to save points for prestige items, rather than spending the points on upgrades when they appear, forcing useful items to be destroyed and beating other people out of upgrades. In addition, DKP has been said to reward commitment, but this loyalty is more to the ideal of cooperation itself than to the guild proper, the composition of which may change over time.

DKP involves point allocation not unlike local currencies. Keith Hart (2005b) champions the idea of merit-based money systems, local currencies, which might be looked at as systems based on social credit. Local currencies represent membership in a society, with moral value imbued within the currency. He envisions a moment where a person is given local currency based on what they

do with one another, or their true social credit; in this future, multiple currencies will be available based on moral-value associations (Hart 2005b). It is interesting to note that players have made the choice to institute such a system in the local guild economy because they have the ability to effect change in this arena. Further, it represents a notable choice for people physically residing in the United States, Canada, and Australia because these real-world economies are individually-biased. This suggests that players choose to reward others for upholding, maintaining, and promoting community values. In this case, the community values being rewarded are commitment, reliability, and cooperation with other community members. By contrast, the coded system in place is inadequate because it allows for individual progress and collective stagnance. The individual preference for collectivity is only truly satisfied by promoting the collective. DKP promotes overall social health by reinforcing those values that allow the community as a whole to progress, increasing the fun of community members, and satisfying the individual's desires for collective progression as a result.

SUMMARY

Fairness online is directly affected by the expectations that people have for value in the real world. People want to receive a quality service for their investment, and this does not end when a person migrates online, although the emphasis in World of Warcraft is placed on a value of fun. We can hypothesize, then, that the monthly fee changes what people would normally expect in an

online environment that is not subject to the same cost due to the money value of their play.

Because players consider many of their guildmates to be friends, measurable in the same way as a face-to-face relationship, expectations of the actions and character qualities of others are much the same between the real and the virtual world. The value that is placed on a moral individual, exemplified through politeness, seflessness, and honesty, translates directly from one space to another due to the money-value underlying play. These moral qualities amount to a player who promotes the justice of fun for all.

DKP is one example of the use of measurable social credit as currency, or money with a moral-value association. It is an integral part of the social memory of the guild that uses it. DKP is accrued in-guild and can only be spent in-guild. The amount of DKP any member of the social group has is made public. Because guilds are primarily built to serve the social needs of players, this causes individual players to gain a positive aura associated with their experience, reliability, and skill in conjunction with the guild's progression as a community. It should be noted, of course, that this system of social credit, like others, makes a statement of value; such a statement may allow for apparent moral failing among members that are not able to progress in this system. In this case, casual players can be associated with being “lazy”, “unreliable”, or “apathetic to collective progression”, detractors from the fun of hardcore players. As was shown, most casual players want the collective to progress as much as, or more than, their individual character, so these kinds of associations may be both hurtful and

incorrect assumptions about a player. Players rely quite heavily on game developers to constrain the game in such a way that both casual and hardcore players alike can progress, but they can get around this reliance by developing local credit systems such as the DKP system. The DKP system is one which attempts to get around the role of the developer as having the final say in player success.

More generally, DKP is a creative, cooperative player – rather than developer – generated means of making World of Warcraft play more rewarding and fun.

CONCLUSION

INFERENCES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The ethnographic study of online communities is important due to the vested interest that players have in their chosen community. Players choose to reside in an online community and this choice indicates something about what they expect to receive from participation in such a community. This research contributes to the relatively small number of current virtual world studies, especially virtual world ethnography. Anthropology has largely ignored the virtual world as a potential environment for research, save for a few exceptions (Malaby 2006a, 2006b), possibly because virtual worlds on the surface appear too different to warrant investigation. I have emphasized throughout that this is not the case. In fact, anthropology is in a unique position to study virtual worlds because of its ability to adapt frameworks to new environments and its emphasis on participant observation in qualitative data capture. Trust being important to players in this world, as we have seen, the participant observer has a much greater advantage in his/her ability to gather rich qualitative data through interview over other means. Most research in virtual worlds, such as the work of Castronova (2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2008) and Yee (2006, 2007, 2009), relies on quantitative methods to understand themes that are similar to those I examined. Malaby's (2006a, 2006b) work utilizes qualitative methods, but it occurs mainly offline, with developers in person at their workplace. Fairness literature in the past has been rooted in either economics or economic anthropology, but neither have examined fairness in a voluntary environment with

the dynamicism and flexibility that World of Warcraft exhibits for players who seek to effect change on societal norms.

My research examined how fair exchange is defined, negotiated, and ultimately achieved during the course of engagement for a player in World of Warcraft. This context of study engages with one of the great anthropological questions – whether culture is created or imposed on people. Because the culture of World of Warcraft is obviously both created (voluntarily through player-driven mechanisms) and imposed (by the coded choices of developers), this community presents a delimited setting in which this problem can be examined. Fairness in World of Warcraft was examined through the medium of money because players actively define the in-game social system through decisions made about gaining and distributing in-game currency. An overall emphasis on the economy of fun emerged as players' motivations and actions were consistently geared towards obtaining optimal levels of fun both for themselves and for others with whom they developed social relationships. In particular, I examined the types of distribution systems that players create and the perceptions of players towards real-money trading when they have the highest stake in risk and reward and the greatest amount of trust in one another, known as the endgame.

It is perhaps not a surprising finding that “fun” is important to players of a game. However, the present study makes an advance on other such studies – notably those of Castronova (2007) and Dibbell (2006) that have similarly emphasized fun as a finding of – and topic for – online research. First, unlike that of Castronova (2007), this research shows how non-competitive actions are

engaged in, formalized, and created by players. Second, unlike that of Dibbell (2006), this research focused on *casual* players who engage in – and create formats for – collective play rather than individual pursuits and gains. In this emphasis on the non-competitive and collective aspects of online social life, and the means by which players build opportunities into their culture against developer resistance, the study is truly anthropological in its approach and commitments.

My contributions are threefold: I have adapted traditional research methods in anthropology to the online environment while using technologies native to that environment; I have expanded upon virtual worlds research by providing a qualitative assessment on a theme with previously quantitatively-gathered data; and I have expanded on fairness literature overall by examining a voluntary environment in which people are able to effect change on the way fairness is navigated and defined.

Loot Distribution

Endgame guilds function primarily to organize raids, thus contributing to individual members' progress through collective action. A raid is the event through which players gain access to the rarest and highest quality armor, weapons, and materials. Developers constrain the types of items a player may obtain by making them only available through organized raids and by introducing the effect of soulbinding. It is this latter point that has caused guilds to develop player-driven modes of wealth distribution in order to ensure that items are given to players who deserve them for the abilities and specializations of a player's

character. Because the best items are made available through raids, organized by guilds, players must trust that guild will distribute items in a fair manner. Reputation and responsibility become critical to guilds in the endgame as they point to the overall trustworthiness of a player, and consequently the amount of fun to be had in engaging with that player (since a significant amount of fun arises out of group successes).

Players innovate as a result of dissatisfaction with the mechanisms put into place by game developers, but previous studies (Malone 2007; Castronova and Fairfield 2008) have only considered hardcore guilds' use of the DKP loot distribution system. Casual guilds are also important for study because they often display a greater emphasis on sociability over accomplishment, although both are certainly at play in collective progress. Player-driven systems such as DKP act to increase the overall fun of more players by rotating player access to items, by ensuring items only go to those whom will receive the most benefit, and by rewarding item access to players for their commitment, participation, and loyalty. In this way, the overall sense of fun is maintained because a player need not worry about items going to waste when they could be better used elsewhere based on statistics, player skill, and length of membership in a guild.

DKP represents a kind of “local currency”, as described by Hart (2005a), a points system that rewards players for what they do with one another. In World of Warcraft, the social health of a guild is promoted through such systems by ensuring that collective action is awarded by both individual and collective progress. The group progresses by distributing gear to those who will most benefit

(who can achieve the best results with an item in group events), to those who have had membership in a guild for a longer time period (who will likely remain in the guild and continue to use items in group events), and to those who consistently contribute to raids (because raids are the mechanism through which items are distributed, participation and long-term membership in the guild are key).

Real Money Trading

Player expectations of developers revolve around balance, with fairness represented in a total balance of fun for all players. When developers institute coded constraints that do not live up to players' needs for balance, players are forced to renegotiate their play in order to optimize fun. Likely the most major constraint introduced in the game, having the greatest effect on both play and the negotiation of fun, is the state of an item becoming soulbound. By making items soulbound, player presence is required at an event where an item appears. This effect puts casual players unable to maintain a raiding schedule, at odds with those who can raid and have access to the best rewards. As a mode of balancing this gap in fun, those players left behind may choose to engage in real-money trading. These same players might in fact see Blizzard Entertainment's developers as engaging in a form of cheating, by placing strong investment requirements on each person in order to function within the collective.

Due to the potential consequences for players having purchased gold, violating Blizzard Entertainment's End-User License Agreement for World of Warcraft, it was important for me to engage with players across a variety of communication media. Through player invitation, I communicated through email,

online chatting, social online profiles, World of Warcraft alternative characters, and so on, with the result that I was able to gain the trust of those who had purchased gold. This trust was pivotal in my ability to connect a player's concerns over RMT with why the player actually engaged in the purchase.

While gold-sellers are generally frowned upon across the player community, what has emerged is a general pardoning of gold-buyers in light of the significantly lower degree of fun available to the more casual player. Because real money trading is used here as a balancing mechanism, the importance of increasing the fun of every player dominates over other issues of cheating. Some players object to the online-offline blend of money or the inflation that results from increased gold on the server, however, the inability of players with outside responsibilities to maintain endgame play becomes a concern to many players. While the time and money investment of a player is cited as motivation for purchasing gold in order to maintain a sense of fun, the justification of real-money trading is in the overall balance of fun. Since fair players aim to increase the fun of others, this is why players can justify real-money trading among peers.

Endgame Fun

In the endgame, players actively contribute to the fun of others through a variety of means, lending time, skills, and in-game materials to benefit an individual with whom a player has a close relationship. It must be noted that players do not place a special emphasis on helping those outside of a guild or social circle. In fact, assistance usually occurs to benefit an individual who will in turn benefit the guild as a whole. In addition to renegotiating loot distribution

systems and engaging in real-money trading to assist with collective progress, players may use their in-game professions to make finished products or refined materials for guildmates. They might purchase in-game foods such as cupcakes simply to make others smile. Fair players also refrain from making arbitrary pricing decisions when auctioning items, instead keeping the relative price of items about the same. This keeps pricing stable and creates fun for the majority rather than a minority who might undercut prices.

These conclusions shed new light on sociability in virtual worlds, on fairness in play, and on the permeability between the virtual world and the real world. All of these issues can be centered around the central theme of the development of an economy of fun within World of Warcraft. While the game itself has coded constraints to encourage collective participation, collective motivation is certainly not coded in. No mechanisms exist in the game to ensure that players look out for their fellow player when the issue of who gets rewarded for what arises.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the conclusion that real money trading is justifiable to World of Warcraft players due to an imbalance in the potential for fun of all players, we might expect that real-money trading would be unjustifiable in a perfectly balanced game world. An expansion for this form of research would likely require placing the researcher in the role of the developer; that is, with the ability to control the time and money investment needed by players and thus the overall

balance of fun. Relatedly, additional research could include an assessment of the perception of real-money trading from a variety of targeted perspectives with an appropriate sample size. Such an expansion would allow researchers to examine the subcultures of World of Warcraft and analyse how these interplay with one another in negotiating an overall sense of fun through fairness. For example, the perceptions of hardcore players in hardcore guilds, casual players in casual guilds, casual players in predominately hardcore guilds, real-money trading consumers, and real-money trading producers. While I was told by a senior researcher that Blizzard Entertainment maintains a closed-door policy on access to developers, developer input would of course benefit such a study. This would likely require a longitudinal study for the main reason of building rapport among players in order to gain trust and thus to allow players a feeling of safety in divulging information about a punishable offense. In addition, such a study might expand by asking players about the constraints they perceive to exist on their play and their feelings on appropriate and inappropriate constraint.

This study could be expanded to include a “cross-cultural” comparison of the remaining server types. A sense of fairness and cheating may be manifested much differently in a player's motivations on a PvP server as the rules about engaging in battle between opposing factions are much different. On a PvP server, players may engage in combat with opposing players at any given time, often resulting in situations where a player may be unable to engage in play at all due to opposing players continually defeating them. Due to this problem, time invested on these servers may be more precious to PvP players than to PvE players who do

not need to waste time in such situations. As a result, we might expect that an emphasis on preserving both personal and collective fun within one's faction, but an emphasis on disrupting the fun of the opposite faction, would prevail. As such, activities such as real money trading may be seen as furthering the fun of one's character/guild/faction at the expense of the opposite faction, and therefore justified. Likewise, we would also expect a significant emphasis on loot distribution systems that ensure fair distribution of loot to players who put more time into ruining the fun of the opposite faction and increasing the fun of a player's faction.

Roleplaying servers, both PvE and PvP, could also be examined for the emphasis players place on cheating with respect to online/offline blending in the endgame. Because roleplaying servers require that players remain in character at all times, it would be expected that real money trading would be highly frowned upon because it introduces an element of the outside world into the game by artificially advancing a player's achievements. So, not only is the idea of real money exchange an issue, but the artificial development of a character in a setting that requires a sense of continuity of play would also likely pose a problem for players.

While I would hypothesize that an emphasis on the overall fun for a player as a motivation for social and economic choices would be maintained throughout all servers, I would expect that the definition of fun on each server would be rather dynamic. We might think of this further study as an examination of the flexible sense of the justice of fun under the overall economy of fun for World of

Warcraft.

In terms of research methods, future research could and should engage with players across more communication media as this was very effective in improving rapport and eliciting important commentary on real-money trading. In addition, group interviewing, not explored through this research due to time constraints, would likely benefit the discussion of real-money trading perceptions and motivations by allowing for the possibility of debate among players followed by individual assessment. In correlating an individual's group and one-to-one responses, a deeper understanding of the motivation for and consequences of real-money trading might emerge. Increasingly, research in virtual worlds should lean towards using the theory and metaphor of traditional methods while focusing on digitally situated means.

SUMMARY

Players in World of Warcraft are not aiming to progress simply as individuals, isolated from the motivations of others, but to progress as a member of a collective in order to achieve maximum levels of fun. Players are unable to see the best content, to experience the greatest triumphs, to gather the best rewards, without acting as one integral spoke in a group. Part of this dynamic, however, requires that a player maintain relevancy in the game. This involves acquiring money and increasingly rare armor and weapons. Casual players can feel left behind due to the investment required by the game. Real-money trading is one way to circumvent such a feeling, allowing the casual player to maintain

relevancy in the collective (and a higher standard of fun) by purchasing items and materials. Loot distribution systems, such as DKP, encourage participation, reliability, and cooperation in the collective. DKP is a system made by players that serves to measure social values in a way that developers have not coded into the game.

Both real money trading and the development of player-driven loot distribution systems arose out of player dissatisfaction with the coded constraints of the game, choices made by developers. Players needed systems that created a balance of fun for all players and developers failed to deliver such systems. As a result, casual players choose to engage in real money trading to allow for a similar level of fun as a more hardcore player. This is a justifiable action even to the hardcore player because the fault rests on the developers in allowing for imbalance. Loot distribution systems such as DKP balance the fun of the collective by rewarding players for promoting the overall social health of the group. These systems are player-driven mechanisms that act to create balance and represent an instance where the imposed culture of the community is enhanced and made effective for each player by the created culture of the community. While the imposed culture places an emphasis on collective action and individual gain, the community-developed mechanisms emphasize collective action for collective gain.

What has emerged from this study of fairness is an emphasis on the justice of fun from the perspective of the World of Warcraft player. Fun is maximized through group events; this is the means through which players progress as

individuals and work to help others to progress within a collective. Because developers do not satisfy this sense of fairness through in-game means, players find ways to seize the means of fun production by engaging in real-money trading and by creating systems of loot distribution based on a more ideal sense of fairness: the equality of fun.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: A sample of words and acronyms used in World of Warcraft chat text

Acronym	Definition
AFK	Away From Keyboard; a player's physical self is not currently near the computer.
Aggro	The aggressive action of an enemy non-player character, incited usually by either traveling too close to a monster or by the act of attacking. In a group, it is the role of the tank to intentionally cause aggro to be routed to themselves.
AH	Auction House; an area within the game world containing Non-Player Characters who, upon interaction via right-clicking, allow players to buy and sell goods indirectly with other players.
Alt	Alternate Character; a character that is not considered by the player to be their main character persona in the game.
AoE	Area of Effect; spells that affect all enemies within a specific area either surrounding the caster or an area on the ground targeted by the caster
Bio	Biological; a break in which the player is likely using the washroom or eating in real life.
BoE/BoP	Bind on Equip and Bind on Pickup; items become soulbound to a character, causing them to be untradeable once either worn or simply placed in the inventory of a player.
Boss	An enemy non-player character ("Mob") with a unique name, backstory, and requiring greater effort to kill, also rewarding players with more desirable items.
Bubble Hearth	Refers to the paladin's use of the Divine Shield spell (which graphically places a bubble around the paladin), making the character free from damage, followed by the Hearthstone, allowing the paladin to portal to their home inn and away from danger.
Buff/Debuff	An effect or spell which either benefits or detracts from the abilities of a character.
Casual	A player who only plays occasionally, referring approximately to a player who logs in less than 4 days per week.
CD	Cooldown; the amount of time that must pass before an item can be used again after a prior use.
CoD	Cash on Delivery; a player may use the in-game mail system to send another player an item with payment to be made via mail before the item is released into the inventory of the other player.
Crit	Critical Strike; the increased output of an action, such as the maximum damage in a weapon strike or the maximum amount of healing of a spell.
Currency	An item used to make purchases, such as the monetary denominations of gold/silver/copper, and items handed in to non-player characters such as tokens. [ex. In currency tab]
DI	Divine Intervention; a spell used by the paladin class only to allow one other character to persist through a failed encounter with an enemy in which other players die.

DKP	Dragon Kill Points; a player-initiated and maintained currency system acquired and used used in-guild only.
DPS	Damage Per Second; the numerical amount of damage dealt by a character on average over one second of time, referring also to a class type who acts primarily as a damage dealer in a group setting.
Epicced/Epic'd	Describes a player whose gear is predominantly of epic quality ie: obtained mainly from endgame raids.
Farming/Gold Farming	Farming refers to repeated killing of the same creatures over and over for specific items or gold, sometimes necessary for regular play. Gold farming specifically refers to the selling of the products of farming for real world money.
FP	Flight Path; the set path of "public" flight transportation; also referring to the exact location of the beginning or end of such a path where a non-player character may be paid to transport a character to another location.
FTW/FTL	For The Win and For The Loss; describes an action or skill that is either desired or considered to be a failure, often used sarcastically.
Gold Spamming	Refers to repeated whispers to a player advertising gold selling or character leveling services.
Hardcore	Refers to an individual player or guild (association of players) who are serious about endgame raiding in providing a significant time commitment, up to seven nights per week.
Healer	The primary role of a healer is to use spells to direct either immediate heals or a number of heals given over a span of time to either a single target (generally the tank) or multiple targets in a group. A healer's secondary role in a group is generally to resurrect group members that have died, reducing travel time from the graveyard back to the corpse.
Instance	A private copy of an event in World of Warcraft, which only allows members of a particular group to enter the portal to that instance. Instances tend to refer to events requiring 5-man groups, while the raid contains 10- and 25-man groups, both of which fall under the heading of dungeon. They contain some of the most difficulty enemy non-player characters and thus some of the best loot. The group makeup for an instance generally consists of a tank, a healer, and three damage-dealing classes.
IRL/RL	In Real Life and Real Life; actions, people, etc. that occur in the life of a player outside of the game, usually referring to the physical world ie: not online.
L2P	Learn To Play; said to a player who seems to lack knowledge in playing the class that they have selected.
Lag	Refers to the temporary inability of a player to function in game for a variety of technical reasons.
Level	Level denotes the approximate power of a character or non-player character, allowing players a method of determining who they are able to fight in comparison and which quests they are able to complete. The maximum level in World of Warcraft for characters has been raised from 60 to 70 for the first expansion pack, and from 70 to 80 for the second expansion pack. Reaching level 80, as a result, allows the player to begin the endgame.

LFG	Looking For Group; either used by a player in chat channels to announce their desire to join a group of other players to play an instance, or referring to a specific chat channel for the same purpose.
LFW	Looking For Work; used by a character to advertise their profession skills, generally performing the service for free with others providing materials, allowing a character to upgrade their profession skill level.
Loot	Noun: Refers to the money, materials, armor, recipes, etc. that may be obtained by a player upon killing and then right-clicking on a monster or upon discovering and right-clicking on a container such as a chest. Verb: Refers to the act of right-clicking on a monster's corpse or a container such as a chest.
Mats	Materials; refers to the raw materials necessary for a profession recipe in order to manufacture an end product.
Mob	An enemy non-player character.
Mount	The land-based steed or flying creature which a player purchases in conjunction with the necessary riding skill in order to get around the world more quickly and conveniently. Mounts may also appear as loot from bosses.
MP5	An item statistic adding additional mana regeneration every 5 seconds, benefiting spellcasters.
Nerf/Hard Mode	Nerfing reduces the effectiveness of a class or enemy non-player character. Hard mode refers to Blizzard introducing algorithms in order to make a boss encounter more difficult for players.
Newbie/Noob/ Nub/n00b	Refers to an inexperienced player, either new to the game or behind in the expectations of others. Can be used to excuse an innocent mistake by a new player or perjoratively when a higher level character makes a mistake, such as being unprepared for a raid.
Ninja	A player who takes loot to which he/she is otherwise not entitled because, for example, the class may not equip this type of loot, the loot does not correspond to the player's level, etc.
OMW	On My Way; the player is undergoing transit to a meeting place with another player.
OOM	Out Of Mana; the character's store of mana is completely depleted, disabling the character from performing his/her role.
PST	Please Send Tell; asking other players to use the whisper command to speak to them, also referencing the “pst” noise used when whispering in normal conversation.
PUG	Pick-Up Group; a group comprised of players who do not know each other, normally created to achieve a quest or to run an instance or raid via the in-game matchmaking system or Looking For Group chat channel.
Pwn	A misspelling of the word “own”, used to indicate that a player dominated either another player or a non-player character. The misspelling has since taken on greater use than the original spelling and the word is used as a noun (“pwnage”) or verb.
Raid	A group of more than five players, usually either precisely 10 or 25 players, who combine forces for the act of raiding, or engaging in a private copy

	(instance) of a dungeon to kill bosses. Raids are generally organized in guilds.
Spawn/Despawn	The act of an enemy non-player character either appearing or disappearing.
Spec	The talent specialization of a character, allowing a player to further constrain (specialize) the play-style of his or her character.
Tank	The role of the tank is to keep the aggro of a mob or mobs on themselves, keeping all other group members free from damage.
VH	Violet Hold; a 5-man instance located in the city of Dalaran, released with the Wrath of the Lich King expansion pack.
Wipe	Refers to the death of all members of a group in an event, including a group-based quest, an instance, or a raid. This forces all members of the group to travel on foot from the nearest graveyard to the event area unless a character remains, through a limited number of spells, with the ability to resurrect the corpse of characters.
WTB/WTS/WTT	Want To Buy, Want To Sell, and Want To Trade; terms used in chat channels – whether the Trade chat channel or elsewhere – to indicate that a player is interested in making an exchange. The exchange is usually then negotiated via whisper chat.
ZOMG	A misspelling of the acronym “OMG”, or “Oh My God”, often intentionally misspelled.

APPENDIX B

The following is a list of sample questions utilized in the initial semi-structured interviewing process. As befits this methodology, questions were added and removed, and conversations may have taken alternate directions than would be shown here.

General Information

How long have you been playing World of Warcraft?
How long have you been in your current guild?
Which characters do you play regularly?
Which character do you consider your main?
How many hours per week would you say you play on average?
What is your /played for your main character(s)?
How would you rate yourself in relation to other players (gear, skills, etc.) on the server? In the Guild? Among your friends?
What types of rankings have you had in guilds and in current guild?
What kinds of criteria were/are stated as important for promotion? What kinds of criteria were considered acceptable for being demoted?

Economy

What are your in-game professions?
What kinds of products do you make?
What venues do you use to sell them?
Do you feel a sense of connection to what you make?
What kind of items can you make that you consider special?
Do you usually gather or purchase materials?
Does fair pricing matter to you in purchasing/selling?
How would you determine a fair price?
What kinds of services do you purchase?
Do you tip?
What motivates tipping? Is it an obligation?
What kinds of services do you do for others?
Do you expect a tip?
Do you have greater expectations when you're required to travel or provide materials?
When you're offline, do you ever think about your in-game gold (the amount you have, how to get more, etc.)?
Do you have a gold threshold you like to maintain?
If so, how do you feel if you go below this threshold?
Do you have a threshold for other forms of currency (badges, spirit shards, other turn-in items)?
Do you consider yourself a gold spender or saver? What motivates you to be this type of player?

What sorts of donations/gifts do you make to other players in the guild? Outside the guild? Among friends and family?
What motivates you to give to other players?
What kinds of things do you make for guildmates (for free or payment)?
What kinds of things do you make for non-guildmates (for free or payment)?
How does your pricing relate to non-guildmates?
What kinds of things do you do for guildmates to help them out?
What kinds of things do you do for non-guildmates to help them out?
What kinds of things do others do for you to help you out?
What kinds of things do others make for you?
What sorts of exchanges do you make that don't involve gold as a currency?
What sorts of restrictions are placed on these exchanges?
What kinds of products do you purchase and how?
What kinds of context would make a good sale/purchase?
What kinds of context would make a bad sale/purchase?
Do you often purchase from the same people?

Loot Distribution
What is your preferred/established method of loot distribution in parties? Raids?
When non-guild members are involved? Why?
Who decides how loot is distributed?
What sorts of benefits/problems arise from your method of loot distribution and what sorts of benefits/problems are seen to arise from other methods?
What makes an item distribution system fair or unfair?
What is DKP and why do you think guilds use this method of endgame item allocation?
What types of actions give a player DKP?
What sorts of restrictions are placed on DKP?
Where is DKP spent?
What sorts of items go into the guild bank and from whom?
What kinds of things do you donate to the guild bank and why?
Who decides how guild bank items are allocated?
How do they decide how they are allocated?
Is this method of allocation fair?
Where are recipients located in the guild hierarchy?
Do you give to new members or mainly old members?

Interaction
How important is it to you that other players like you?
What are some qualities of a good player?
What are some qualities of a friendly player?
What are some qualities of a poor player?
What are some qualities of a fair/unfair player?
What kinds of things do you do to develop good relationships with other players?

What kinds of things do you avoid in developing good relationships with other players?
How would you describe the members of your guild?
Who do you communicate with outside of WoW/Vent but online?
Who have you have met offline?
Which players in guild do you consider acquaintances, friends, or family?
Which players outside of your guild do you consider acquaintances, friends, or family?
Do you measure these categories (acquaintance, friend, family) different online and offline? If so, how?
How does gender play into:
Friendships?
Closer relationships?
Transactions?
Expectations (of other players themselves or of them in situations)?
The status of a player (in guild hierarchy for example)?
Opportunities (to make money, for example)?
Have you ever felt someone's expectations of you were unfair? In what way?

Real-Money Trading
Do you consider a player buying gold fair?
Do you consider a player buying a leveled account fair?
Do you consider a player buying items, such as mounts, fair?
Have you ever purchased a virtual world currency using your "real money"?
Where did you purchase this from?
How much?
When?
Describe the purchasing experience.
Did you tell other players about this? If not, why not?
What is the motivation behind a player purchasing gold?

Developer Constraints
How do you feel about the changes Blizzard has made in making badges (thus epic endgame gear) available through dailies, not just raids?
Does this level the playing field?
Is this fair?
How does this change the expectations of casual and hardcore players?