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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Social Experience in World of Warcraft: Technological and Ideological Mediations

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Informatics

by

Nicole Kathryn Crenshaw

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Bonnie Nardi, Chair  
Assistant Professor Joshua Tanenbaum  
Associate Adjunct Professor Judith Gregory

2017



## DEDICATION

To

Dignitas, my second family,  
Dunemaul, my second home,  
Kat, Skrunk, Nate, Janiece, and Alex, my confidants and chosen siblings,  
Erik, my bio-bro and continual inspiration,  
Schmom and Daddeh, the foundational support who pushed me here,  
and Bonnie, the only Night Elf that I will take instruction from,

for all of the supportive tanking, healing, and DPS that you have provided throughout this process, thank you.



For the Horde!

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Conference on Computer-Human Interaction in Play; Publicity and Social Media Chair	2016
Feminism in Contemporary Culture; Co-Organizer Led the organization and facilitation of an event focused on the benefits of social justice and feminism in our culture. Recruited speakers, helped organize fundraising campaign, contacted audio-visual support for the event, and managed event set up and take down.	2016
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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Social Experience in World of Warcraft: Technological and Ideological Mediations

By

Nicole Kathryn Crenshaw

Doctor of Philosophy in Informatics

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Bonnie Nardi, Chair

As society shifts towards spending more time online for business and leisure, examining human behavior in virtual environments is crucial. To better understand the role that games play in our society, I analyze social experience in World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the longest running massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMO). Since its release in 2004, Blizzard Entertainment, the maker of the game, has periodically changed WoW. To streamline aspects of gameplay, such as the time required to play and level of difficulty in play, some expansions removed or changed many social affordances that previously encouraged and rewarded sociality between players. While these changes were appealing to some players, they greatly reduced the social experience of the game, to the dismay of others. What do these changes mean for players who enjoyed the social experience World of Warcraft once provided?

I argue that the social experiences produced in online games are a product of two factors: the social affordances provided by the game and the ideology of the larger culture in its full sociopolitical context. I employ neoliberalism, a set of ideological values that are embedded in North American daily life, as an analytical lens to make sense of social

phenomena that I observed in player communities on World of Warcraft. Neoliberalism has permeated our society, regardless of whether or not individuals actively espouse or even agree with the associated ideological values.

Through my dissertation work, I document the ways that these two factors affect social experiences in online games. My study contributes to a wider discussion of how massively multiplayer online games can facilitate players' social experiences, establish a sense of player community, enable the development of social identities, and afford spaces to provide social support to one another. What happens when designers change aspects of a game that the player community previously utilized for social interactions? How do these changes communicate cultural values to players? In what ways do players internalize and police those values through their own gameplay? These are some of the main questions that I answer through my work.



## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

As society shifts towards spending more time online for business and leisure, examining human behavior in virtual environments is crucial. Despite the countless hours people now spend online, we do not yet fully understand the social and cultural significance of games in our society. To better understand the role that games play in our society, I analyze social experience in World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the longest running massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMO). Since its release in 2004, Blizzard Entertainment, the maker of the game, has periodically changed WoW. Small “patches” (software updates), and major “expansions” (incorporation of new geographies, activities, and equipment) have altered the play experience to varying degrees (Braithwaite, 2015; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Moore, Ducheneaut, & Nickell, 2007). To streamline aspects of gameplay, such as the time required to play and level of difficulty in play, some expansions removed or changed many social affordances that previously encouraged and rewarded sociality between players. While these changes were appealing to some players, they greatly reduced the social experience of the game, to the dismay of others. What do these changes mean for players who enjoyed the social experience World of Warcraft once provided?

I argue that the social experiences produced in online games are a product of two factors: the social affordances provided by the game and the ideology of the larger culture in its full sociopolitical context. I employ neoliberalism, a set of ideological values that are embedded in North American daily life, as an analytical lens to make sense of social phenomena that I observed in player communities on World of Warcraft. Neoliberalism has permeated our society, regardless of whether or not individuals actively espouse or even agree with the associated

ideological values. It is important to note that the neoliberal ideology and neoliberal values are not unique to North America, and in fact, have a rather significant support in Europe as well. However, given that World of Warcraft was created in North America, and the players that I observed and spoke to were from North America, I focus on neoliberalism as it has manifested in North American culture.

Through my dissertation work, I document the ways that these two factors affect social experiences in online games. My study contributes to a wider discussion of how massively multiplayer online games can facilitate players' social experiences (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Tanenbaum, Seif El-Nasr, & Nixon, 2014; Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012; Williams et al., 2006), establish a sense of player community (Nardi & Kallinikos, 2010; O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015; Poor & Skoric, 2016; Tanenbaum et al., 2014), enable the development of social identities (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2015; Tausczik, Dabbish, & Kraut, 2014), and afford spaces to provide social support to one another (Bardzell, Bardzell, Pace, & Reed, 2008; Farzan, Dabbish, Kraut, & Postmes, 2011; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2002). My work, however, introduces another facet to this discussion. I explore what happens when neoliberal values are communicated through game design and gameplay in problematic ways. What happens when designers change aspects of a game that the player community previously utilized for social interactions? How do these changes communicate cultural values to players? In what ways do players internalize and police those values through their own gameplay? These are some of the main questions that I answer through my work.

### ***Theoretically Situating My Research***

Some may argue that using cultural ideologies to examine a video game is too far a reach. However, given that many technologies reflect our wider cultural ideologies (Igira & Gregory,

2009; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012) – is it not logical that humans would embed the values of their culture into the technologies that they create? This same fact holds true for games. Research shows that, at one time, players in World of Warcraft were creating meaningful communities within the game world (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Moore et al., 2007; Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006; Schiano, Nardi, Debeauvais, Ducheneaut, & Yee, 2011; Williams et al., 2006). While rich online communities were the norm at the time these studies were published, now things have changed. Indeed, some research continues to find long-term, meaningful communities in games such as EVE Online (Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013; Feng, Brandt, & Saha, 2007) and (the now defunct) Faunasphere (Consalvo, 2015; Consalvo & Begy, 2012). But more often these communities tend to be the exception, rather than the rule. In my research, I found that the ways that players behave in World of Warcraft and how the game has changed since the mid-2000s are colored by a neoliberal ideology, in which society values competition and individualistic self-interest over community relationships. Research on World of Warcraft indicates that “solo play,” or playing alone, has become more common, and is often encouraged by the game’s current design (Braithwaite, 2015; O’Connor et al., 2015). This is not to say that these values were not present in the game in 2004 when it was released, but that many changes have reinforced these values and ideas through the types of gameplay that are encouraged. In my work, I examine the ways that the neoliberal ideology has emerged in online gaming communities in and around World of Warcraft.

The concept of neoliberalism that I use can be traced back to Milton Friedman’s seminal book, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Friedman, 1962). Friedman claims that a true liberal man is economically and politically free and participates in a society with limited governmental power.

These economic and political freedoms support the development of a free market where each individual is only responsible for his or herself. In Friedman's view, governmental interventions have only hindered the development of liberal society. Many theorists across disciplines now refer to Friedman's description of an ideal sociopolitical-economic system as the "neoliberal ideology."

I draw on theoretical discussions of neoliberalism that stem from Michel Foucault's critique in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault, 1979) because I am concerned with the ways that the neoliberal ideology affects the social; in this case, social experiences in World of Warcraft. The effects of neoliberal ideologies on social interactions have been discussed in relation to electronic medical records (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012), digital games (Dyer-Witthof & de Peuter, 2009; Ekbia & Nardi, 2012), crowdsourcing (Irani & Silberman, 2013), and changes in the wider society (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1979; Piketty, 2014a; Stiglitz, 2014). Thus, my research contributes to an ongoing discussion of how the neoliberal ideology emerges through the technologies we use and the digital communities in which we participate. I acknowledge that this is a difficult assertion to make. However, too often broader cultural and economic influences are overlooked in studies of online communities (Ekbia & Nardi, 2015, 2016). I argue that it is important to consider wider cultural and sociopolitical influences when examining social lives online to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena we see as researchers. Cultural effects on behavior are often invisible to people when they are embedded within specific cultural systems (Bell, Blythe, & Sengers, 2005). However, dismissing the effects of culture in research is not only irresponsible, but woefully ignorant to the role that culture plays in our lives – particularly in entertainment mediums. Indeed, contemporary video games would not be where

they are today without a long history of war games inspired by the military industrial complex (Begy, 2013; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Trammell, 2013).

Wendy Brown, a professor in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, argues that in a society that subscribes to a neoliberal ideology, “all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized” (Brown, 2015). In a neoliberal society, all interactions or transactions have a cost benefit analysis attached to them. “How does this interaction benefit ME?” becomes a central motivating question for determining what to do and with whom to do it. Brown builds on Foucault’s concept of neoliberalism in which individuals function as self-interested agents who work to generate capital through competition with other market agents (Foucault, 1979). Simply, in societies that subscribe to a neoliberal ideology, people are “competing with, rather than exchanging with each other” (Brown, 2015).

Brown argues that a neoliberal ideology tends to have four harmful cultural effects. The first problem that arises in neoliberal societies is *intensified inequality*, where the top strata of society accumulates and maintains more wealth than the larger middle or lower classes who continue to work for less security, fewer benefits, and fewer opportunities for upward mobility. Second, neoliberalism tends to encourage *unethical commercialization* of situations and objects that society would normally consider inappropriate to commodify, such as the exploitation of human workers. The third issue is a *continually-growing intimacy between corporate and financial capital within the state*, which leads to corporate-controlled decisions about politics and economics. Finally, neoliberalism wreaks *economic havoc* on the economy by destabilizing or causing dramatic fluctuation in financial markets (Brown, 2015). Both Foucault and Brown argue that neoliberal societies become governed by an ideology that applies economic values and

measures to all aspects of human life. I further detail multiple critiques of neoliberalism in Chapter 2.

Following discussions of neoliberalism by Foucault and Brown, it is clear that neoliberal societies can produce many harmful cultural effects. For the sake of my argument about neoliberalism in World of Warcraft, I focus on two of the four problems that Brown discusses in her contemporary analysis of neoliberalism in democratic societies: intensified inequality between the 1% and the working classes and the unethical commercialization of human workers (Brown, 2015). These two problems are exemplified within the current World of Warcraft play experience. Unethical commercialization is particularly prevalent in technologies of heteromation that are designed to monopolize on the abundance of human capital in neoliberal societies (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012, 2014, 2017).

### ***Practically Situating My Research***

In my dissertation, I examine the effects of the neoliberal ideology and social affordances on World of Warcraft in three ways. First, I examine the ways that Blizzard Entertainment has changed the social affordances of “retail” World of Warcraft, which in my analysis, frequently encouraged neoliberal practices and values in play. I discuss several changes and their effects on the play experience, but one basic example can be illustrated through a redesign of the city of Orgrimmar in World of Warcraft. There are several capital cities, such as Orgrimmar, where people congregate. Within each city, players can learn new skills from trainers, participate in the auction house, send and receive mail, store items in their bank, flaunt rare weapons or armor to other players, and simply enjoy the presence of other players.

Originally, Orgrimmar was designed to centralize three main buildings where players tended to congregate: the bank, the auction house, and the mail box. Figure 1.1 shows the

original layout of the city, with the bank located in the center of the image and the auction house located to the right. Players would frequently idle their characters around the bank (and sometimes on the bank roof!) to be in an area with many other people who were actively playing. In one of the major expansions, Blizzard Entertainment remodeled Orgrimmar, altering the former “watering hole” located at the heart of the city.

These changes generated controversy within the player community. Searching through World of Warcraft’s official forums reveals thousands of threads echoing a sentiment captured by one thread’s title: “I really miss OLD Orgrimmar.” The aspects of the city that resonated with players were designs that afforded opportunities for players to socialize. As one player aptly described: “[I] loved old Org, used to sit upon the top of the old bank (along with a dozen others) watching people scurry around town.” Now, players are only left with the memories of the city as it once was, and, as many recall, the social hotspot that was the Orgrimmar bank roof. I examine specific changes to WoW’s social affordances and how these changes affected social experience in Chapter 5.



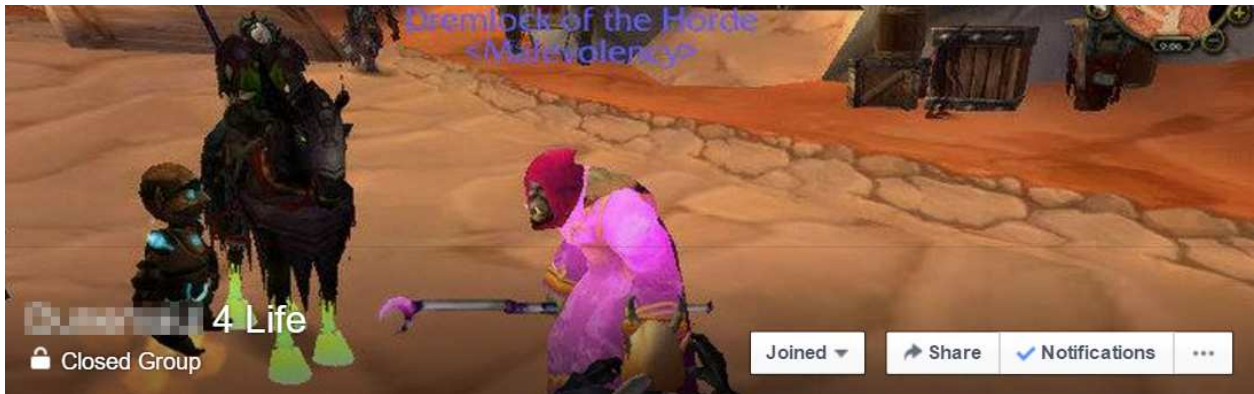
**Figure 1.1: Old Orgrimmar (top) and New Orgrimmar (bottom). (Screenshots from MMOChampion)**



Second, I document social activity on the “Moonfall 4 Life” Facebook group (Moonfall and Moonfall 4 Life are pseudonyms). In February 2014, a former member of the Moonfall realm created the Facebook group, which, according to the group’s description “is for those folks who met many moons ago on a lame duck WoW server called Moonfall.” Moonfall 4 Life served as a place for current and former members of the realm to connect and communicate outside World of Warcraft. Players retained WoW-related materials that were up to 10 years old, including screenshots, videos, chat logs, and other media that they shared within the group. These memories tended to revolve around moments of fun players shared in the game together, rather than neoliberal value systems such as guild prestige, player rank, or individual achievements. This community-focused mindset is exemplified through the group’s banner (see Figure 1.2), which shows a well-known community member wearing a silly pink outfit during a recording of a parody YouTube video<sup>1</sup> (see Figure 1.3). Rather than selecting a screenshot of characters displaying rare or difficult to obtain armor sets, the community decided to emphasize a memory from the community, a memory that captured the lighthearted play experiences that were commonly found in the early years of World of Warcraft on the Moonfall server. The creators of the page chose to use a picture that represented the values of the Moonfall community (i.e., a well-known and liked player) rather than one that portrayed the commodified signifiers of status, such as rare equipment, often praised as valuable by the game designers.

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<sup>1</sup> The video titled “Drem is Outrageous” was originally posted in January 2008.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZjpmvXp\\_hk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZjpmvXp_hk)



**Figure 1.2: The Moonfall 4 Life Facebook Group Banner (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016).**



**Figure 1.3: A screenshot from Drem is Outrageous (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016).**

However, some posts focused on more serious game design decisions and changes to World of Warcraft over time. While some posts in the group concerned contemporary World of Warcraft issues, many discussed events from when the community played together from roughly 2004 through 2010. Moonfall 4 Life became a place where players could relive old memories, reminisce about the game, and, perhaps most importantly, catch up with each other's personal lives, including births, deaths, marriages, and other significant events. The group was not just a venue for nostalgia, but a site to maintain a community. Many discussions addressed the decline of social experience following certain changes to World of Warcraft (see O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015 for further discussion). I analyze the Moonfall 4 Life community and their social practices in Chapter 5.

Third, I explore life on a World of Warcraft private server. Private servers allow people to host their own version of a game by using proprietary software (Debeauvais & Nardi, 2010; Winkie, 2015). Though commercial companies do not create private servers, servers usually attempt to replicate aspects of the company's original game. Once a private server is running, players can connect to the server and play the game it emulates for free. Many people actively play on private servers even though Blizzard forbids them in WoW's Terms of Service. To circumvent copyright laws, most private servers are hosted from Europe where it is more difficult to punish violations of The United States' laws. Private servers are generally created and administered by small, dedicated development teams that spend countless hours coding, scripting, and debugging their servers to ensure smooth play. Private servers have existed since at least the release of the first WoW expansion in 2007 (and probably earlier), but they have become more popular and numerous over the last few years (Winkie, 2015).

One private server, "Nostalrius Begins," has attempted to recreate a version of "Vanilla" World of Warcraft as it was in 2004. "Vanilla WoW" or just "Vanilla," is a term the WoW community uses colloquially to refer to World of Warcraft prior to any expansions. As of November 2015, Nostalrius Begins had over 10,000 players online concurrently, which is comparable to the populations of WoW servers hosted by Blizzard. While some private servers change aspects of game play such as how frequently certain items appear or how much experience a character gains for performing certain tasks, Nostalrius Begins is unique in that it advertises itself as being a "Blizz-like" or "Blizzard-like" server; that is, the developers of the server worked to recreate the original World of Warcraft experience as Blizzard had designed it in 2004 with almost identical geographies, content release timelines, and patches. With a home page lauding "the glory days of World of Warcraft," (see Figure 1.4) it is clear that something

about this period of time was special for many players. But what about this “golden age” of World of Warcraft resonated with players? And is it possible to recreate that experience?



**Figure 1.4: The Nostalrius Begins Home Page (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016).**

Though some private servers may have started as a way to relive the “glory days” of World of Warcraft, such as Nostalrius Begins, people’s motivations for play in these spaces may be changing. I have observed instances where the players themselves have enforced neoliberal ideologies through their behaviors and actions in the game and game-related spaces; for example, through hyper-quantification of performance metrics and determining individual value based on rank or status. Even in what we might consider the “right” spaces, such as old Orgrimmar, the neoliberal ideology emerges in the behaviors of the player. Often, these behaviors change the play experience to mirror the values portrayed in the retail version of the game. By performing comparative work between communities on retail WoW and WoW private servers, I demonstrate that affordances alone do not contribute to players’ behavior change. Instead, I reveal the relationship between the neoliberal ideology of Western culture and the social affordances embedded into World of Warcraft’s game design that contribute to an overall decline in community experience. I evaluated 11 months (April 2015 – February 2016) of ethnographic data from two North American guilds on Nostalrius Begins in Chapter 6.

### ***Why This?***

Why am I exploring World of Warcraft in particular, rather than another MMO or multiple MMOs? I have chosen World of Warcraft as a field site for a number of reasons. First, World of Warcraft is one of the longest running and most widely known MMOs available. The world in World of Warcraft has existed as a place where people could interact since 2004, and, at one time, over 12 million residents inhabited the game world. Second, World of Warcraft is one of the most heavily explored games in academic literature, which provides a solid framework for evaluating differences over time and contrasting changes in player behaviors (Bardzell et al., 2008; Braithwaite, 2015; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Dabbish, Kraut, & Patton, 2012; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2015; Schiano et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2006; Yee, 2006b, 2014). Third, changes to World of Warcraft's software are documented through official patch notes, forum discussion, and wiki sites. This extensive documentation makes it easy to determine when changes to the games' social affordances were implemented, when player reactions to the events began, and whether further changes were implemented as a result of player feedback. Fourth, the meta-game community surrounding WoW is much larger and more visible than other MMOs. Facebook groups, fan forums, and the annual BlizzCon all contribute to the comprehensive World of Warcraft community. World of Warcraft provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between the social affordances of the game and the social agents, or people, in the game community. Social affordances and social agents work together to create the gameplay experience we see in World of Warcraft and other online games, and it is difficult to pull them apart. However, by examining gameplay experience in a variety of WoW-based contexts, I provide a more comprehensive understanding of the different ways that these behaviors manifest.

The stories, memories, struggles, and concerns that people share in WoW-based spaces are meaningful and rich. The play experiences I examine in my research through retail World of Warcraft, the Moonfall 4 Life Facebook group, and the Nostalrius Begins server provide important information about the social and cultural history of games. Players use this type of oral and/or textual history to document the development of an online community and the ways in which that community has changed, as remembered by members of the community. Through my research, I seek to explain the documented problem of diminished social experience in World of Warcraft by exploring changes to the social affordances of the game over time and the influence of the wider neoliberal ideology of Western culture.

## CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Foundations

In this chapter, I introduce the two theoretical frameworks that I apply to analyze social experience in World of Warcraft. Finding theoretical frameworks for my dissertation was a long and somewhat arduous journey. Originally, I planned to use the concept of social affordances along with social identity as a way to understand why players behaved differently in online games than in other online and offline spaces. However, as I continued my ethnography on *Nostalrius Begins*, it was clear that identity was not a sufficient or robust enough theoretical foundation for my data. Behaviors that I was originally attributing to social identity surrounding “gamers,” seemed, more accurately, to be a reflection of the culture surrounding the game. My readings began to shift to cultural reflections of games and the role that games play in society. Eventually I discovered *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), and after reading the Introduction I was stunned at how the themes and concepts resonated with what my players were saying and what I was experiencing through my ethnographic work. By looking for recent research that used Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s text, I found Braithwaite’s (2015) paper, *WoWing Alone: The Evolution of “Multiplayer” in World of Warcraft*, and from that piece, I narrowed down further reading to literature on neoliberalism.

Using neoliberalism as a theoretical framework for my analysis allows me to invoke a discourse that is often overlooked within game studies. Neoliberal values emerged from the data I collected. It was not my original choice for a theoretical construct, but it was impossible to ignore its effects as my data collection continued. By employing a neoliberal lens for analysis purposes, I can position my work in contemporary literary discourse and add new and important insights to the current discussion. By introducing culture as a component of analysis in my

research, I have been able to articulate justifications for behavioral phenomenon, explore rationales for technological changes, and investigate situations where the technology, the players, and the culture all blend together and influence one another. For these reasons, I have chosen to use neoliberalism as a framework of analysis for social life in World of Warcraft.

The rest of this chapter includes a discussion of the concept of social affordances, which I use later to discuss how changes to World of Warcraft affected the types of social interactions possible between players, and a description of the history and usage of the socioeconomic theory of neoliberalism.

### Social Affordances

J.J. Gibson introduced the concept of *affordance* as a way to explain animals' perceptions of their environment: "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill" (Gibson, 1979, emphasis in original). Gibson created this definition with biology and physiology as primary concerns; that is, the relationship between a potentially non-human animal and its natural environment. However, as the concept has become embedded into a broad range of disciplines that focus on humans' interactions with digital technologies, rather than natural environments, the meanings and associations of affordances have changed.

In 1988, Don Norman appropriated the concept of affordances for use in examining humans and their relationships to technologies. Norman redefined affordances as "the relationship between a physical object and a person" (Norman, 1988). Norman's definition differs from Gibson's original definition in several meaningful ways.

First, Norman's definition focuses specifically on "artificial, human-made objects," rather than the surrounding natural environment (Norman, 1988). Thus, a single environment may



include a number of objects all with their own individual affordances. Gibson, however, discusses the affordances of an environment in a comprehensive sense: “The composition and layout of [environments] *constitute* what they afford” (Gibson, 1979). Thus, objects in the environment are still part of the wider environment that provides affordances.

Second, Norman’s definition explicitly addresses both the ways in which an object is used, but also the abilities of the person who is interacting with the object. For Norman, affordances are not just what an object offers, but “a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (Norman, 1988). While Gibson was not oblivious to this relationship, he argues that the relationship heavily favors the environment. Gibson states, “An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer ... [However] the organism depends on its environment for its life, but the environment does not depend on the organism for its existence” (Gibson, 1979).

Third, Norman argues that for affordances “to be effective...[they] have to be discoverable [or] perceivable” (Norman, 1988). Simply put, the affordances of an object must be perceived by the actor using the object. Norman uses the example of a glass window to discuss the importance of perceiving an object’s affordances. While a window affords transparency that allows us to view the outside, occasionally some users do not perceive that windows also afford preventing passage through the space they occupy. The result is many incidents where people and animals try to move through glass doors or windows and injure themselves. Gibson, on the other hand, argues that affordances are, to some extent, objective: “An important fact about the affordances of the environment is that they are in a sense objective, real, and physical...It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior” (Gibson, 1979). Just because one person perceives “the fact that a stone is a missile does not imply that it cannot be other things as

well. It can be a paperweight, a bookend, a hammer, or a pendulum bob. It can be piled on another rock to make a cairn or a stone wall. These affordances are all consistent with one another” (Gibson, 1979). While perceiving an affordance may inform how an actor uses the object, it does not mean that other affordances of the object no longer exist.

Finally, Norman makes a further distinction between the “constraints” or “powerful clues, limiting the set of possible actions [with an object]” and affordances of an object (Norman, 1988). Gibson’s definition, on the other hand, combines potential use and potential limitations under the single term “affordance.”

Norman’s development of the concept of affordances for digital technologies has been employed in the fields of human-computer interaction (Bradner, 2001; Gaver, 1991; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012), computer-supported cooperative work (Bradner, Kellogg, & Erickson, 1999; Gaver, 1992), and other social-computing fields (Dohn, 2009; Kreijns et al., 2002; Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & van Buuren, 2004; Wellman et al., 2003). However, while Norman’s advancement of the term for use with digital technologies was beneficial, some of his distinctions make the concept of affordances somewhat convoluted in comparison to Gibson’s more general definition and meanings.

Over time, the concept has come to mean many different things, and is often used to refer to any instance of an individual interacting with a technology. To understand what “researchers are trying to capture when they use [the concept of affordances],” Stendal et al. (2016) performed a small-scale literature review. Based on the analysis, Stendal et al. identify some common elements across studies of affordances: objects with properties, actors with goals, action possibilities, and actors’ capabilities. However, the authors also identified six dimensions that differed between discussions of affordances in research on Information Systems: whether

affordances were intended versus emergent, functional versus non-functional, and potential versus actual.

First, affordances are either intended (Grgecic, Holten, & Rosenkranz, 2015; Schultze, 2010; Seidel, Recker, & Vom Brocke, 2013; Strong et al., 2014; Volkoff & Strong, 2013) or emerging (Bygstad, Munkvold, & Volkoff, 2015; Goh, Gao, & Agarwal, 2011; Jung & Lyytinen, 2014; Leonardi, 2011, 2013; Robey, Anderson, & Raymond, 2013; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007). Intended affordances are those that are deliberately considered when designing a system, and thus embedded into the digital environment or the technology itself. Emerging affordances are those that arise from interactions between the technology and the human actor.

Second, affordances are either potential (Bygstad et al., 2015; Gaver, 1991; Goh et al., 2011; Grgecic et al., 2015; Jung & Lyytinen, 2014; Leonardi, 2011, 2013; Robey et al., 2013; Schultze, 2010; Seidel et al., 2013; Strong et al., 2014; Volkoff & Strong, 2013; Zammuto et al., 2007) or actualized (Seidel et al., 2013). The concept of potential affordances closely follows what Gibson (1979) meant: affordances enable the potential for certain types of actions. Actualized affordances, on the other hand, refer to actions that are themselves affordances. The idea that affordances are actualized or refer, specifically, to the actions one takes with a technology, rather than the *potential* for actions – whether perceived or not, is not unheard of (Chemero, 2003; Seidel et al., 2013), though it is not a commonly accepted description of affordances. Taken actions alone do not dictate all the possible ways a person may use a technology, and thus, cannot be used to fully discuss the affordances of a technology. Underlying affordances exist, regardless of whether they are employed or perceived by an individual (McGrenere & Ho, 2000).

Finally, affordances are either functional (Goh et al., 2011; Grgecic et al., 2015; Leonardi, 2011, 2013; Schultze, 2010; Seidel et al., 2013; Strong et al., 2014; Volkoff & Strong, 2013; Zammuto et al., 2007) or non-functional (Leonardi, 2013; Schultze, 2010). Functional affordances refer to those affordances that are intentionally embedded into a technology, while non-functional affordances are “independent of a specific functionality, such as social affordances” (Stendal, Thapa, & Lanamäki, 2016). While making this distinction between affordances is useful, I argue that the terminology is not necessarily sound. Obviously any function provided by an affordance is “functional,” but it seems that Stendal et al. are trying to clarify the distinction between affordances explicitly embedded by designers and affordances that emerge through interaction with the system. What their analysis suggests is that the concept of affordances is being used in many different ways, some that follow Gibson’s and Norman’s early definitions of the term, and others that appear to diverge from these more general descriptions. However, this has broadened the definition of the concept so that there is no specific, succinct meaning to the point.

Other theorists have broadened the concept of affordances to include opportunities for social interactions. Bradner (2001; Bradner et al., 1999), drawing inspiration from the work of Ackerman and Palen (1996), developed the notion of *social affordances*. Bradner defines social affordance as “the relationship between the properties of an object and the social characteristics of a given group that enable particular kinds of interaction among members of that group” (Bradner, 2001). She uses a door with a window in a busy hallway as an example (Bradner, 2001; Bradner et al., 1999). The window affords the person opening the door the ability to see if the other side is clear. Because people are socialized not to hit others with doors, a person will

refrain from opening the door when they can see someone in front of it. The assumption of a possible social interaction supports the social affordance and vice versa.

For this work, I have established my own definition of the term affordances. Drawing from Gibson directly, I posit that an affordance includes opportunities for both “benefit or injury, life or death” (Gibson, 1979), that is, affordances can include both good and bad possibilities. I argue that an affordance can be experienced by a single actor, but can contribute to the experience of multiple actors within a group. When discussing affordances, I am referring to potential actions that can contribute significantly to the social experience of an online technology. It is important to note that I am not arguing that the affordance is the experience itself, but rather that the affordance is the simple fact that the potential for interaction exists. I am not interested in all affordances. Instead, I focus only on those affordances that create or inhibit the potential for social interactions. Thus, I build on Bradner’s work (2001; Bradner et al., 1999), and term what I am examining *social affordances*.

Let us now discuss an example of social affordances in World of Warcraft. One example of a change to social affordances that affected WoW’s social experience was the “Group Finder” interface (see Figure 2.1). Group Finder automates the process of finding other players for a variety of collaborative activities, such as “dungeons” (small group activities) and “raids” (large group activities).



**Figure 2.1: The Group Finder interface in *Legion*, the most recent WoW expansion. Players are rewarded for creating groups for Dungeons, Raids, or other activities through the interface. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017)**

In December 2006, Blizzard introduced “Looking For Group,” the first version of Group Finder, named after a phrase players used when forming groups through chat channels. The interface allowed players to hasten the process of creating and organizing groups by advertising that they were looking for group members, or searching through a list of partially-formed groups. Even with Looking for Group, however, there were often still long wait times. In a patch released in December 2009, Blizzard attempted to remedy this problem by providing a larger pool of potential group members that drew players from multiple servers. While more players decreased wait times, the new system changed how players interacted within a group. For example, players were not concerned about maintaining reputations and relationships with

people from different realms because they were strangers whom the player was unlikely to see again (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2014a). Blizzard altered the social affordances of WoW by changing the system to optimize speed and efficacy in group-building for collaborative activities.

## Neoliberalism

*Neoliberalism* is a term with a varied and nuanced history within political-economic philosophy. The concept of neoliberalism, as it is discussed in its contemporary form, can be traced back to American economist and Nobel Prize winner, Milton Friedman. However, its history can be traced back to the mid 1900's. In this section, I address the history of neoliberalism, Friedman's contributions to the development of neoliberalism, contemporary critiques of the neoliberal ideology, and neoliberalism as it emerges in game studies.

### ***History of Neoliberalism***

Alexander Rüstow, a German sociologist and economist, coined the term “neoliberalism” in 1938 at the Colloque Walter Lippmann, a colloquium for intellectuals interested in discussing liberalism and its role in political economics (Rüstow, 1938). Rüstow developed neoliberalism at a politically and economically tumultuous time: Germany was between two World Wars, the effects of the Great Depression were still being felt throughout Western society, and capitalist ideals were slowly being embedded into German laws and regulations (see Hartwich & Sally, 2009 for a more in-depth discussion of Germany's political and economic landscape). Initially, Rüstow claimed that neoliberalism was a “Third Way” between capitalism and communism. He worked to make a clear distinction between neoliberalism and what he called “paleo-liberalism”: “Our neoliberalism differs from paleo-liberalism by not reducing everything to an economic question. On the contrary, we believe that economic affairs must be subordinated under supra-economic matters” (Rüstow, 1949). He elaborates in his later work on the role of the economy in

society: “The economy must be in a serving position [in which] the economy is there for the people [and not the reverse]” (Rüstow & Hoch, 1963). This may seem contradictory to those familiar with the contemporary definition of neoliberalism, in which all interactions have economic value associated with them. However, Rüstow’s claims illustrate the early goals of the term, and allow us to examine how the term has progressed over the years. While Rüstow argued for a *laissez faire*, free market economy, it is unlikely that these types of markets existed in Germany during the time Rüstow was writing (Hartwich & Sally, 2009). Understanding Rüstow’s definition of neoliberalism is important because it differs significantly from its contemporary usage by scholars such as Friedman.

Since Rüstow, neoliberalism has undergone many reinterpretations and changes. Even at the Colloque Walter Lippmann there was a discrepancy between “the ‘true neoliberals’ around Rüstow and Lippmann on the one hand and rather ‘old fashioned’ liberals around Mises and Hayek on the other” (Hartwich & Sally, 2009). Each side of this debate argued that neoliberalism should emphasize different values, with Rüstow and Lippmann arguing for an ideology that fell “somewhere between liberalism and socialism” (Hartwich & Sally, 2009), and Mises and Hayek subscribing to an ideology that more closely fits the more contemporary usage of the term. The distinct philosophical differences between these two groups contributed to a lack of consensus among the members of the Colloque Walter Lippmann about what the term neoliberalism entailed, which affected opponents’ perspectives on the concept. Hartwich and Sally (2009) acknowledge that in contemporary society, people rarely identify as “neoliberals,” and instead, the term is mostly used by opponents of the ideology to create a clear concept of the enemy. Indeed, a survey of 1,200 political blog readers found no one that self-identified as a “neoliberal,” instead favoring categories such as “classic liberal,” “conservative,” and



“libertarian” (Norton, 2009). However, while the average citizen may not identify as a neoliberal, despite holding values of the ideology, I use the term in my work because it is what many contemporary theorists use when analyzing the types of policies and behaviors that I have seen enacted by both Blizzard Entertainment in World of Warcraft and the player community in Nostalrius Begins.

### ***(Neo)liberalism***

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Friedman redefined neoliberalism for Western society. During this Cold War period, there was a global philosophical movement against Marxist and Socialist values, creating an ideal environment for the development of the neoliberal ideology and its associated values (Amadae, 2003; Westad, 2005). Friedman created his definition of neoliberalism while situated in an era of rapid technological, political, and social advancements between the 1960s and the 1980s. It is important to note that Friedman does not use the term “neoliberalism” in his work, explicitly. He claims that “the rightful and proper label [for the political and economic viewpoint he discusses] is liberalism.” (Friedman, 1962). However, when Friedman referred to “liberalism,” he was describing what we now understand as contemporary “neoliberalism.” Friedman’s discussion of liberalism in *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) identifies and defines many of the concepts and key tenets of neoliberalism. Friedman emphasized the value of economic transactions in neoliberal societies by creating a political and economic theory that is intimately related to capitalism.

Friedman (1962) referred to this type of capitalism as *competitive capitalism*, or “the organization of the bulk of economic activity through private enterprise operating in a free market as a system of economic freedom and a necessary condition for political freedom.” In a society with competitive capitalism, businesses and individuals compete with one another to

provide the highest quality products at the lowest cost. As members of a free market system, prices would be determined between sellers and buyers of the available goods and services without governmental intervention. In theory, this is a political and economic system that gives the individual power over his or her economic transactions, and thus, freedom within the market.

Friedman's theory emphasizes a limited governmental scope, dispersed governmental power, and the preservation of individual freedoms through limiting and decentralizing governmental power. Friedman argued against "a single, large government" that is involved in the affairs of the average citizen. Instead, he argued that each individual was responsible for themselves, or, in some cases, their family. Friedman discusses a variety of ways that neoliberalism can influence societal systems. I will focus on three examples to demonstrate the theory in practice: poverty, distribution of income, and social welfare.

Two related benefits of neoliberalism that Friedman highlights are limited governmental scope and dispersed governmental power. Friedman argued that the government's "major function must be to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, [and] to foster competitive markets." When discussing distribution of income, Friedman argued that the government should not use graduated income taxes nor advocate for inheritance taxation. He wrote: "I find it hard, as a liberal, to see any justification for graduated taxation solely to redistribute income. This seems a clear case of using coercion to take from some in order to give to others and thus to conflict head-on with individual freedom." In this case, each individual has a right to the money that they have earned, and should not be taxed more simply because they have earned more. In Friedman's model, all individuals would be taxed equally, to allow those who earn more to keep more of their capital. Friedman believed that limiting the government's

involvement in financial aspects of individuals' lives offset the centralization of political power and promoted the civil freedoms of citizens.

Another benefit is the preservation of individual freedoms. Friedman argued that: "Each man has an equal right to freedom. This is an important and fundamental right precisely because men are different, because one man will want to do different things with his freedom than another, and in the process can contribute more than another to the general culture of the society in which many men live" (Friedman, 1962). Thus, Friedman's definition of freedom was tied to systems of inequality where one member of the society can contribute and receive more than another member. Friedman's definition of freedom also justified income inequality and poverty in Western capitalist societies. He elaborates on this point when discussing the ways in which social security denies individuals their individual freedoms: "Those of us who believe in freedom must believe also in the freedom of individuals to make their own mistakes. If a man knowingly prefers to live for today, to use his resources for current enjoyment, deliberately choosing a penurious old age, by what right do we prevent him from doing so?" In this case, the individual is free to choose what they value: planning for long-term life investments or living in the present.

### ***Critiques of Neoliberalism***

Though Friedman created neoliberalism as a theoretical framework for economic and political systems, "the theoretical utopianism of [the] neoliberal argument has ... primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve [the] goal[s] of neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2007). Some scholars critique Friedman's theory as more ideological than practical. Even though neoliberalism began as a theory, it has developed into an ideology about how systems should work in our modern, Western society. The criticisms of Friedman are quite long-standing, but I focus on two contemporary scholars: Wendy Brown

and Thomas Piketty. Wendy Brown, a professor of political science from the University of California at Berkeley, developed a recent critique of neoliberalism in her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brown, 2015). She asserts that the contemporary neoliberal ideology reduces all interactions, behaviors, and frameworks of existence to the economic value they generate, even in situations without direct monetary exchange (Brown, 2015).

Friedman (1962) argued that “The United States has continued to progress; its citizens have become better fed, better clothed, better housed, and better transported; class and social distinctions have narrowed; minority groups have become less disadvantaged; popular culture has advanced by leaps and bounds. All this has been the product of the initiative and drive of individuals co-operating through the free market.” However, his political-economic model is not quite as beneficial as he claimed. While this ideology works for some people (specifically, those in positions of privilege), it ignores systematic and institutional ingrained inequalities in society. Thus, when some members of society experience problems, the ideology quickly degenerates (Brown, 2015; Dyer-Witheford, 2001; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Ekbja & Nardi, 2016; Piketty, 2014b). I provide two contemporary critiques of neoliberalism from the perspectives of an economist and a political scientist to explain the flaws with the neoliberal ideology as Friedman discusses it.

Thomas Piketty is a French economist who analyzes income inequality. In his book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty, 2014b), Piketty examines wealth and income inequality in Western countries over the last two centuries. Piketty disputes many of the claims that Friedman makes in *Capitalism and Freedom*, often supported by more data than Friedman supplied. In fact, Friedman (1962) starts his argument for flat tax rates and abolishment of

inheritance taxes by saying, “The judgment that follows is a personal, though I hope not utterly uninformed, opinion, stated, for sake of brevity, more dogmatically than the nature of the evidence justified.” Friedman’s opinion *is*, however, uninformed, and contradicted by Piketty’s work. Piketty (2014) explains, “In contrast to what many people in Britain and the United States believe, the true figures on growth (as best one can judge from official national accounts data) show that Britain and the United States have not grown any more rapidly since 1980 than Germany, France, Japan, Denmark, or Sweden. In other words, the reduction of top marginal income tax rates and the rise of top incomes do not seem to have stimulated productivity (contrary to the predictions of supply-side theory<sup>2</sup>) or at any rate did not stimulate productivity enough to be statistically detectable at the macro level.”

While Friedman offers no substantial evidence to support his claims, Piketty provides two centuries worth of data and demonstrates that flat income taxes have not, in fact, contributed to less inequality. Similarly, Oxfam, an international organization dedicated to the reduction of poverty and social injustice worldwide, stated in their 2015 annual report that 62 people (53 men and nine women) now control the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world (Slater, 2016). These facts directly contradict Friedman’s claim that capitalism would lessen the extent of inequality, and, in fact, demonstrate just how wide the gap between the wealthy and the poor is in contemporary society.

Wendy Brown has critically analyzed the neoliberal ideology by considering its effects on wider culture, including education, laws, governance, and democratic institutions. In her book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brown, 2015), Brown demonstrates neoliberalism’s effects on aspects of contemporary Western government, policy,

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<sup>2</sup> Supply-side theory states that economic growth can be most effectively stimulated by lowering barriers to the production of goods and services while increasing capital investment.

and political practices. Underlying much of Brown's discussion of neoliberalism are institutionalized social structures, such as racism and sexism, which affect and influence the policies and practices that she discusses. Friedman often ignored or even disputed these social structures, when he claimed that marginalized groups benefit the most from competitive capitalism: "[T]he groups in our society that have the most at stake in the preservation and strengthening of competitive capitalism are those minority groups which can most easily become the object of the distrust and enmity of the majority the Negroes, the Jews, the foreign-born, to mention only the most obvious. Yet, paradoxically enough, the enemies of the free market the Socialists and Communists have been recruited in disproportionate measure from these groups. Instead of recognizing that the existence of the market has protected them from the attitudes of their fellow countrymen, they mistakenly attribute the residual discrimination to the market" (Friedman, 1962).

In his misunderstanding of why racial and ethnic minority groups may feel disenfranchised by neoliberalism, Friedman ignored a point that Brown is quick to identify: "Responsibilized individuals are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so" (Brown, 2015). Friedman assumes a society where everyone has access to equal resources, and "individuals [are] effectively free to enter or not to enter into any particular exchange, so that every transaction is strictly voluntary" (Friedman, 1962). However, individuals are very frequently *required* to engage in certain transactions in order to survive, regardless of their desire to participate. In a survey conducted by the bank HSBC with over 16,000 participants from 15 countries, United States residents were least likely to leave an inheritance to their offspring with only 56% of participants expecting to leave money behind, and of that 56%, the average inheritance was roughly \$177,000 (Ellis,

2013). This means that in the United States, over half of the population begins their life with an economic advantage. Friedman came from working class parents who were able to manage their finances enough to send him to college, and in the development of his theory, it is clear that he believes everyone should be able to do the same.

But not all individuals have the privileges that Friedman had. Brown acknowledges the white, middle-class, male default that Friedman assumes and its effect on the democratic freedom of other demographics: “Women, racial and religious minorities, slave descendants, new immigrants, queers, not to mention the poor and working classes, have seized on the universalism and abstraction of liberal democratic personhood to insist on belonging to the category of ‘man’ (when they did not), to stretch liberal meanings of equality (to make them substantive, not only formal), and to press outward on freedom as well (to make it bear on controlling conditions of existence not mere choice within existing conditions)” (Brown, 2015). Many minority groups are working to survive in a society that does not define freedom for them, and, in fact, actively works against them pursuing their civil liberties. This is the atmosphere that neoliberalism fosters: not an economy for the people, but an economy for the privileged, often at the expense of the working class. Brown ends her discussion by reflecting on the definition of democracy: “‘Democracy’ signifies the aspiration that the people, and not something else, order and regulate their common life through ruling themselves together... The term ‘democracy’ contains nothing beyond the principle that the demos rules, although as the only political form permitting us all to share in the powers by which we are governed, it affords without guaranteeing the possibility that power will be wielded on behalf of the many, rather than the few, that all might be regarded as ends, rather than means, and that all may have a political voice” (Brown, 2015). Much of Friedman’s argument assumes an economy where everyone is

working to support themselves. However, as Brown explains, his model ignores institutional inequalities and often favors certain groups of individuals over others.

### ***Neoliberalism in Games Studies***

Some theorists touch on issues of neoliberal values in games through non-explicit terminology, such as “productive play” (Bardzell et al., 2008; Ekbja & Nardi, 2017; Humphreys, 2005; Lindtner & Dourish, 2011; Lindtner, Mainwaring, Dourish, & Wang, 2009; Pearce, 2006), “playbor” (Dibbell, 2007a; Kücklich, 2005; N. Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015; T. L. Taylor, 2012; Wang, 2015) and “co-creation” (Bartle, 2004; Humphreys, 2005; Kow & Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2006, 2011; Prax, 2015; T. L. Taylor, 2007). Though game studies scholars do not usually frame their research using neoliberalism as an analytical lens, many examine player behaviors that contribute to the exploitative, economic ethos that is crucial to neoliberalism. Players frequently provide free labor to game companies through the simple act of playing. By populating the game world, participating in the in-game economy, interacting with others, and, sometimes, creating “mods” or modifications to the game (Kow & Nardi, 2010; Kücklich, 2005; Nardi & Kallinikos, 2010; Postigo, 2007; Scacchi, 2010) players contribute to a company’s financial capital (Castronova, 2005; Humphreys, 2005; Lindtner & Dourish, 2011; Prax, 2015; N. Taylor et al., 2015). These free forms of labor often provide additional revenue for game companies by exploiting players’ work, even if that work is voluntary (Dibbell, 2007a; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Ekbja & Nardi, 2017; Nardi & Kallinikos, 2010). Sometimes, players embody neoliberal values through governance strategies and organizational hierarchies in games (Paul & Philpott, 2009; Silverman & Simon, 2009; Williams et al., 2006). These studies contribute to a broader discussion of the division between play and labor in a neoliberal society. Distinctions between “play and production, between work and leisure, and between media



production and media consumption” are heavily blurred in the current sociopolitical landscape (Pearce, 2002, 2006).

Other theorists have explicitly used the concept of neoliberalism to analyze games and gameplay experience. I build on the work of scholars such as Braithwaite (2015) and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), who have explored how neoliberal values inform game design and affect player behaviors.

In their seminal text, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) assert that “video games are a paradigmatic media of empire”; that is, games have become a global phenomena that are intimately intertwined with systems of power such as economics, administration, politics, military, and communication (Hardt & Negri, 2001). Using a modified version of Hardt and Negri’s (2001) definition, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) define “Empire” as “the global capitalist... system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states, among whom the United States still clings, by virtue of its military might, to an increasingly dubious preeminence.” They document instances of “immaterial labor” (Dowling, Nunes, & Trott, 2007; Dyer-Witheford, 2001; Ekbja & Nardi, 2014; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt, 2005, 2005; Lazzarato, 1996; Terranova, 2000) in games, or work “that produces the informational, cultural, or affective element of the commodity” (Negri, Virno, & Hardt, 1996).

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter use World of Warcraft as an example of what Foucault terms a “regime of biopower” (1979), or a system where human bodies are controlled, exploited, and disciplined as a way to exert and display power. Many practices in WoW contribute to “neoliberal regimes... on a planetary scale,” including gold farming (turning in-game currency to currencies such as the US dollar), “grinding,” i.e., repetitive, factory-like actions in-game, and

the inability to “win” the game (Bojin, 2013). Sometimes neoliberal values are embedded into the game design (Eklund & Johansson, 2013), for example the perpetual tension between the Alliance and the Horde, the two opposing factions in the game world. It is important to note that the type of exploitative labor that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter are examining has become ubiquitous in the contemporary world, and, frequently, the labor is performed by players willingly and for free (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012, 2014).

Braithwaite (2015) also uses World of Warcraft as a case study of how forms of governmentality can affect gameplay. While previous research on WoW, often centered around Nardi’s (2010) *My Life As A Night Elf Priest*, emphasizes serendipitous social interactions, altruistic kindness, and opportunities for virtual strangers to collaborate (Bardzell et al., 2008; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2007; Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006; O’Connor et al., 2015; Schiano et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2006), Braithwaite reminds readers that the game is not the same as it was in 2004. She explains that Blizzard changed the focus of the game over the years to “encourage payers to see each other as obstacles to success” and to “emphasize individual achievement rather than collaborative effort” (Braithwaite, 2015). By investigating the lifespan of WoW, rather than one point on a timeline of the game’s existence, Braithwaite provides a comprehensive study of how neoliberal values emerged in the game’s design. She analyzes world events, matchmaking systems, and phasing technology to demonstrate how Blizzard “is slowly replicating a rationality that valorizes the individual at the expense of the community and that threatens to undermine our conditions of civic engagement by situating social life within the metrics of the marketplace” (Braithwaite, 2015). This work highlights the fact that culture is constructed and thus, changeable. Culture is contingent on many factors; in MMOs, game design, player behaviors, and ideologies all

contribute to the construction of culture in important ways, such as dictating appropriate norms and systems of governance.

Discussing and analyzing cultural and economic influences on games are important topics that game studies scholars and game designers need to address. My work contributes to an ongoing discussion of governance, human labor, and the value of work in online games by analyzing the culture in which the game is created and played to understand how players interact with the game and with each other (Bojin, 2013; Castronova, 2005; Dibble, 1998).

## **CHAPTER 3: Background**

To discuss World of Warcraft, a Massively Multiplayer Online game (MMO), I want to first contextualize the MMO genre by addressing the history of virtual worlds. A virtual world is “a place described by words or projected through pictures which creates a space in the imagination real enough that you feel you are inside of it” (Damer, 2008). Nardi (2010) identifies four key elements of virtual worlds: they are spaces where participants 1) create “characters”, 2) navigate a three-dimensional space, 3) have the ability to communicate with others, and 4) can access a number of digital objects. While these features might sound like qualities of very advanced systems, they appeared in the earliest, text-based virtual worlds, multi-user dungeons (MUDs). As early as the 1970s, people were congregating in MUDs to chat, collaborate, role-play, and explore textually described virtual worlds (Bartle, 1996; Cherny, 1999; Damer et al., 1997; Damer, 2008). By the 1980s, MUDs were becoming more graphically and technologically complex. Early virtual worlds paved the way for the contemporary MMO genre (Bartle, 2009; Damer, 2008; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2015).

Contemporary MMOs share similarities to their text-based predecessors, but are designed to be much more advanced technologically and graphically. Some consider Meridian 59 to be the first MMO (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2015). Technically, the 1996 title was the first Internet-based 3D MUD, but the new graphical advancements changed what players expected of MUDs and early MMOs in significant ways (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2015). Since this keystone title, the genre has continued to push technological boundaries to provide vibrant and graphically complex worlds for players to inhabit.

In the next section, I provide some background for World of Warcraft and Nostalrius Begins, a World of Warcraft private server. Though it is not the first MMO, World of Warcraft

has played an important role in the development of MMOs as a genre. Knowing how the game is structured and how players engage with it is important for understanding the cultural phenomena that I discuss in later chapters.

## World of Warcraft

Blizzard Entertainment is a video game developer and publisher founded in February 1991 in Irvine, California. In 2004, they released World of Warcraft. WoW is one of the largest MMOs, and certainly the most famous (Braithwaite, 2015; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2007; Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2015; Schiano et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2006). At its peak in 2012, WoW had over 12 million subscribers worldwide.

To access WoW, a person needs to buy the copy of the game itself, in addition to a subscription that allows access into the game. The population fluctuates, but Blizzard's 2015 Q3 report stated that 5.5 million people across the world had active WoW subscriptions (MMO-Champion, 2015). Since this report, Blizzard has stopped making WoW's subscription numbers publicly available, though reasons for this are unclear. Figure 6 shows reported subscription numbers from WoW's release to the last publicly available report in September 2015. It is likely that subscriptions have continued to decline, although the current expansion, *Legion*, released at the end of August 2016, probably increased numbers again, as typically happens. In Figure 3.1, it is possible to see spikes, even if they are small, in the number of subscriptions before the release of a new expansion – the most notable being between the end of *Mists of Pandaria* and the release of *Warlords of Draenor* (WoD).



**Figure 3.1: World of Warcraft subscription numbers from November 2004 to September 2015. (Screenshot from MMO-Champion)**

***Introduction to World of Warcraft***

World of Warcraft is a 3D, medieval-accented, fantasy game. In World of Warcraft, players create whimsical characters, sometimes called avatars, to navigate the fictional world of Azeroth (see Figure 3.2).



**Figure 3.2: Feralas, a densely forested area of Azeroth. Feralas is one of many areas in World of Warcraft that players can explore. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017)**

## *Characters*

To enter the game world, a player must first create a character. Players are not limited to a single character, and some studies have found that players are more likely to create and use multiple characters (Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, & Wadley, 2009). However, many players tend to focus on one “main” character that they spend most of their time playing. Players can create characters from two opposing factions: the Alliance or the Horde (see Figure 3.3). Each faction has access to different fictional races with different abilities, histories, and languages. Many of these races can be traced back to early fantasy pop culture such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or Gygax’s *Dungeons and Dragons* (Fawcett, 2006; Nardi, 2010; Tschang, 2007).

Narratively, the factions are engaged in a never-ending battle, which immediately creates camaraderie among players of the same faction and competition between players of opposing factions. Functionally, this antagonism between factions limits the ways in which players can interact. For example, players of opposing factions cannot communicate with one another. Thus, players are unable to negotiate peace between the Alliance and the Horde, and are instead forced to participate in the endless militaristic combat Blizzard designed.

Players control their characters via input from their keyboard and mouse. Characters can be directed to explore the diverse landscapes of Azeroth, slay magical monsters, gather resources such as herbs and minerals, practice crafts such as alchemy and blacksmithing, participate in an economy by auctioning items to other players for “gold,” an in-game currency, and exchange goods and services by completing trade transactions with other player-controlled characters (Nardi, 2010). Thus, the character functions as a player’s medium for interacting with Azeroth and its inhabitants.



**Figure 3.3: Two World of Warcraft characters: a Horde character (Left) and an Alliance character (Right). (Screenshot by Crenshaw & Nardi 2017)**

Characters are categorized according to their main role in the game. *Tanks* are very durable and can be attacked by enemies a number of times before succumbing to death, but are not capable of very strong assaults against enemies. *Damage Dealers*, often referred to as *DPS* (Damage per Second), excel in performing devastating attacks against enemies, but do not have the endurance of Tanks when it comes to receiving damage. *Healers* have a range of spells that can mend the wounds of characters in combat, although they are not known for their damage capabilities or their durability. These three character types complement each other, and frequently groups of characters need to collaborate to overcome some of the most difficult tasks.

A main goal of World of Warcraft is to perform various tasks with one's character to develop skills to confront greater challenges. However, character development is not only a quest to improve their main ability, e.g., healing, durability, or damage. Characters can also become proficient at cooking, fishing, first aid, and a variety of other non-combative professions such as mining, tailoring, and leatherworking. There are also metrics for evaluating a character's "reputation" or relationship with a number of in-game groups; improving a character's reputation requires continual work helping affiliates of each particular organization.



WoW is a continual journey for self-improvement that the game quantifies and tracks via statistics and numerical values. Most progress in WoW can be equated to a simple progress bar. While leveling, players track their growth on a progress bar that slowly fills up as a character inches closer to the next level. WoW tracks progress through professions similarly, with titles indicating one's experience (e.g., Apprentice to Legion Master), numerical values denoting how much a skill has been increased, and visual progress via a partially filled bar (see Figure 3.4). Even a character's relationships to organizations across Azeroth are quantified via progression bars (see Figure 3.5). As a player completes quests for a particular group, her character's reputation with that faction increases, giving her access to equipment only available to affiliates of that faction. Together, these features make the process of tracking individual progress on a number of metrics simple and intuitive for players.



**Figure 3.4: A character's progress increasing a variety of non-combat skills, such as herbalism and cooking. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017)**



**Figure 3.5: A character's reputation with different in-game factions. Reputations can progress from Hated to Exalted. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017)**

### *Leveling*

Characters start at level 1, which narratively means that they lack experience in the game world (regardless of the player's expertise). Level 1 characters have access to only a small number of skills, and must learn new ones by "leveling up." To level up, and thus gain access to new abilities and powers, players must attain additional levels by progressing their character through a series of "zones," or themed areas of the world such as lush forests, arid deserts, dank swamps, and icy taigas. Players can advance to new zones by completing "quests" (narrativized tasks written and coded by Blizzard) offered by Non-Player Characters (NPCs) in each area that allow them to reach higher levels and confront greater challenges (see Figure 3.6). When WoW was first released, the maximum level was 60. Blizzard periodically increases the maximum

level, but at the time of writing it was 110. There is no way to “win” World of Warcraft, so to speak. Instead, a continually increasing level maximum encourages players to work to improve their characters over and over again.



**Figure 3.6: A character accepting a quest from the NPC Shadow Hunter Mala. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017)**

Attaining a new level indicates that the player has achieved a certain skill proficiency and can access new spells or skills for their character. Reaching a new level is aesthetically rewarding for players, as they see their character briefly glow and hear an enchanting gong tone. Some players even announce to others that they have leveled up by typing “ding!” into their chat windows – a phrase meant to mimic the noise that players hear when they level up.

New spells that characters gain access to might include abilities that increase the amount of damage a character does or that heal a character’s wounds, as seen in Figure 3.7. Players are slowly given access to new spells and skills as they level their character to allow them to perform more tasks and face stronger enemies. Different types of characters will have access to different types of abilities – no one character can do it all!



**Figure 3.7: A character casting a spell to heal her wounds. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017)**

### ***Dungeons & Raids***

While leveling tends to be an activity that players perform individually, other in-game activities are group-focused. Players work together in teams to progress through “dungeons” and “raids” i.e., activities that require the collaboration of five to forty players. Both dungeons and raids may take quite a while to complete, sometimes several hours broken up over a few days. In dungeons and raids, players challenge strong enemies known as “bosses” that provide special rewards, such as armor and weapons, once players successfully defeat them. While dungeons are available to characters throughout the leveling process, raids tend to require more skill and coordination of a larger number of players, and thus are only performed by characters at the maximum level. Because raids require a higher level of skill and coordination, players are compensated with better quality items. Players interested in optimizing their character to its full potential need to participate in raids in order to have the opportunity to obtain the best equipment available.

## ***Servers***

People play on one of many servers, referred to by Blizzard as “realms.” Realms are identical versions of the game world that are populated by different groups of players. Realms have population limits of several thousand players. Blizzard carefully manages the maximum realm sizes to account for technological and hardware limitations of the physical servers, which ensures smooth play. Blizzard distributes players across realms corresponding to geographical regions in the real world. For example, players in North America, Latin America, South America, Southwest Asia, Australia, and New Zealand can play on the “Americas” region (other regions include Europe and Asia). Blizzard determines which region a player has access to based on the country of origin affiliated with the player’s WoW account. Realms are further categorized by the type of play experiences that players might seek. For example, Player versus Player (PvP) realms encourage combative behaviors between players across the areas of Azeroth, while Player versus Environment (PvE) realms discourage player combat outside of designated combat zones.

## ***Social Features***

Though Nardi (2010) claims that “World of Warcraft is not a chat room,” and indeed, it is much more than that, there are several modalities for chatting and socializing in WoW. Players converse with one another in text-based chat channels. Different chat channels serve different purposes. For example, the General chat channel can be used for friendly discussion, questions, or off-topic banter, while the Trade chat channel is used for advertising the buying and selling of goods and services. Players can also interact through “whispers,” or direct chat messages between two people.

Some players associate with relatively stable groups known as “guilds” that play and collaborate together regularly (Nardi, 2010; O’Connor et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2006). Guilds have access to their own chat channel to allow for easy communication between members. While a player may interact mostly with individuals from their guild, they can engage with anyone they see in-game as they pursue activities – though, as previously mentioned, chatting is restricted to players with characters on the same faction. That is, an Alliance character and a Horde character are incapable of chatting with one another.

Players may also have a “friends list” of others (guildmates or otherwise) from their faction with whom they particularly like to play. This list allows the player to see when their friends are online and where they are located within the game. Originally, players could only add other players from their faction who played on the same server to their friends list. However, with the introduction of Battle.net system, Blizzard now allows players from any faction and any server to add each other to a friends list. While previously, friends lists were unilateral, that is, Player A could have Player B on their friends list, but not vice versa, the Battle.net friends list is reciprocal. Now, players must agree to add each other to a friends list, which makes the feature more like a social media network. Now players have the option to consent to being added to a friends list, when previously someone could “friend” another player without their permission. By adding a person to the Battle.net friends list, a player will automatically see any time their friend is online, regardless of which character their friend is playing. This new system also allows players to communicate across different Blizzard games.

### ***Changes to World of Warcraft***

Blizzard updates World of Warcraft periodically. The game as it was in 2004 is dramatically different from the version of World of Warcraft at the time of writing. Visually, it is

clear that the game has matured as a result of a graphics overhaul in 2014 (see Figure 3.8). This change completely redefined the aesthetics of World of Warcraft, but is only one way in which the game has evolved over the last 12 years.



**Figure 3.8: An example of the graphics update in the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion. A Human Male Before (left) and After (right). (Screenshot from MMO-Champion)**

Other changes have altered the play experience. Some changes are subtle. “Patches,” or small, periodic software updates, can introduce minor changes to the game, such as adjustments to characters’ abilities, updated character animations, bug fixes, and so on. Other changes are more overt. Blizzard releases “expansions” to World of Warcraft every few years that introduce new geographies, characters, activities, maximum levels, and equipment to the game. Since the launch of the original game, Blizzard has released six expansions, the most recent being the *Legion* expansion in 2016. Because of these regular changes to WoW, it is impossible to talk about the game without consideration for time; that is, what did the game look like and play like at the time the game was being analyzed? The effects of these changes over time had serious effects on the play experience for many people, and analyzing when the game changed and how changes affected players is important for understanding the play experience of WoW more holistically.

## Nostalrius Begins

Some of the changes to the play experience have altered the social experience of WoW in a way that is undesirable for many players. Some of these players who desire sociality in their gaming experiences feel that their needs are not being met in the current version of World of Warcraft. As the structure of WoW has changed through patches and expansions, individuals began developing their own methods of maintaining earlier forms of gameplay. Some players have found ways to recreate the experiences that they enjoyed from older versions of the game through private servers. Private servers are illegal, player-administrated emulations of a game that allow people to connect and play for free. Though it may seem dramatic that people are willing to break the law to play video games in a certain way, private servers are an appealing alternative for many (Winkie, 2015). Players seeking different types of gaming experiences are taking matters into their own hands by seeking out private servers or simply leaving the version of the game that Blizzard offers.

One private server, Nostalrius Begins (or just, Nostalrius) was based in France and opened to the public in February 2015. Nostalrius, a “progressive vanilla” server, appealed to players’ nostalgia for Vanilla WoW by recreating a “Blizz-like” game as close to the original version of WoW as possible. Nostalrius included nearly identical game geographies, content release timelines, and patches to those of “retail WoW,” Blizzard’s proprietary version of the game. In comparison to other private servers that often had bugs or poor scripting that hindered the play experiences, Nostalrius was, for the most part, a high functioning recreation of the original WoW experience. This was not an easy task. Though some assets in World of Warcraft reside on the “client-side,” or players’ computers, other “server-side” features required dedicated labor from a team of programmers to ensure smooth functioning. Some features required that the



Nostalrius team recode entire sections of the game themselves. While retail WoW limited access to servers by geographic region, Nostalrius allowed players from across the world to play together on one PvP server. A small team of developers led by two administrators, known as Viper and Daemon, kept the community informed about upcoming changes, discussions, and plans for the private server experience. In October 2015, the developers released a second Player versus Environment (PvE) server for those players who did not want to participate in global combat with other players.



**Figure 3.9: The Nostalrius Begins logo – a combination of the Alliance and Horde emblems.**

Nostalrius reported almost one million accounts with over 10,000 players concurrently online at peak hours during the peak of their popularity. However, these numbers still pale in comparison to the number of current WoW subscriptions. Rather than a widely acceptable alternative form of play, private servers currently function as a niche form of resistance. Most people do not know about private servers, and others avoid them because they violate Blizzard's Terms of Service. Many private servers allow players to donate real money for items in the

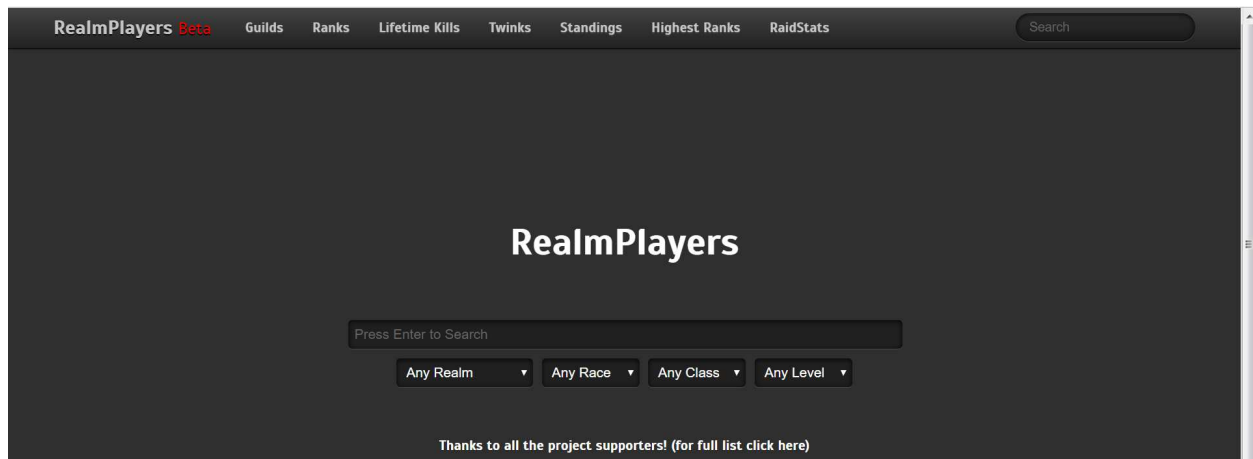
game, which allows server hosts to generate revenue from Blizzard's intellectual property. In 2010, Blizzard won \$88 million in a lawsuit against a private server owner. According to the judge's order, "[the] Defendant's PayPal account received \$3,052,339 in gross revenues [from the private server]" (Graft, 2010). But the potential for legal recourse has not reduced the popularity of private servers. As private servers have gotten closer to replicating the original WoW experience, they have attracted more players and garnered media attention (Graft, 2010; Winkie, 2015).

### ***RealmPlayers***

Sometimes, gamers use "mods" or "add-ons" to alter their play experience by modifying the game. Scholars have explored the use of mods in World of Warcraft to help players perform better, change the functionality of the game, and improve the overall play experience (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012; Kow & Nardi, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Kallinikos, 2010; Scacchi, 2010). "RealmPlayers" was a third-party mod created to quantitatively track characters' performance on WoW private servers. After collecting the data, the mod would sync information with a public site (see Figure 3.10) for players to analyze the data. At higher levels of raiding on Nostalrius, RealmPlayers was a popular mod.

RealmPlayers aggregated data and metrics for in-game activities, such as how much "damage" or "healing" a character does, from people running the RealmPlayers application. While some metric tracking was available in retail Vanilla WoW, the level of detail in RealmPlayers was not possible in 2004. Dilatazu, the online handle of the creator of RealmPlayers, works from donations and volunteer labor from other players to maintain the program. After downloading the RealmPlayers application, players record information about the characters that they interact with in-game. Once the player exits the game, RealmPlayers uploads

the information to the public RealmPlayers server (accessed via <http://realmplayers.com/>). Nostalrius was one of about 20 private servers for which data could be recorded.



**Figure 3.10: The RealmPlayers homepage. Players can query for individual characters or guilds. (my screenshot)**

If searching for a character on RealmPlayers, data includes character information (e.g., Name, Guild, Level, Race, Class, Guild, and when the character was last seen), gear information (e.g., Weapons, Armor, Mounts, and when each was obtained), and PvP information (e.g., Rank, Honorable Kills, and current PvP standing).

When querying a guild on RealmPlayers, data includes guild information (e.g., Name, Raid Progress, and Members) and a sub menu to view the guild's recorded raiding data.

Within the portion of RealmPlayers on raiding, people have access to guilds' raid information (e.g., Raid Name, Start Time, End Time, Attending Members, Damage Dealt, and Healing Dealt), records per boss fight (e.g., Top Damage Per Second and Top Healing Per Second), and individual boss fight data (e.g., Damage Dealt, Healing Dealt, Fight Duration, and Items Dropped). Figure 3.11 shows a sample damage meter for an individual boss fight where each character is denoted by the different colored bars corresponding to their specific character class (e.g., Rogues are shown in yellow, while Mages are shown in blue). Each character's

contribution to the fight is shown in raw numbers, damage done per second, and percentage contribution to overall damage. This meter is just one of several that quantifies players' performance in raids.



**Figure 15: RealmPlayers damage meters for a boss fight.**

Using the data aggregated by players, RealmPlayers generates a leader board for each server that ranks all players along different dimensions, such as character type and activity. Figure 3.12 shows a sample of an individual character's rank on the RealmPlayers leader board. RealmPlayers gives characters an overall active rank for damage and healing and ranks for each raid boss with additional quantified breakdowns. Players and guilds can find their data on the RealmPlayers website, and use it to analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of their play in comparison to their guildmates and to other players on their server. Through RealmPlayers, it is possible to find the "best" players on a server by evaluating their rank. Many Nostalrius players used RealmPlayers to determine the success of guilds and the overall skill of players. For some guilds, RealmPlayers meters became a main source of evaluating individual players' success and value for the guild.

**Active Ranking in Molten Core**

DPS Rank: #503 / #10 with DPS 91.1  
HPS Rank: #94 / #14 with HPS 210.1

Boss	DPS #Rank	HPS #Rank	Average DPS	Average HPS	Top DPS	Top HPS	Kill Count
Lucifron	#545 / #12	#113 / #15	84.2 (420.9, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	163.3 (261.5, 248.1, 133.8, 88.4, 84.6)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Magmadar	#559 / #12	#48 / #9	110.9 (554.5, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	281.7 (411.6, 340.3, 322.3, 167.9, 166.6)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Gehennas	#560 / #15	#128 / #11	50.0 (250.1, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	149.2 (337.7, 150.1, 118.2, 85.3, 54.7)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Garr	#599 / #15	#14 / #2	122.9 (614.7, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	294.5 (348.1, 330.1, 299.6, 277.3, 217.3)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	26
Baron Geddon	#585 / #17	#80 / #19	71.1 (355.7, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	133.0 (279.4, 195.2, 81.5, 60.1, 51.1)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Shazzrah	#525 / #10	#192 / #37	80.9 (404.4, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	75.7 (219.5, 56.3, 46.9, 42.0, 13.8)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	24
Sulfuron Harbinger	#554 / #11	#111 / #19	127.4 (636.8, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	210.4 (276.1, 274.7, 191.0, 180.2, 129.8)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Golemagg the Incinerator	#568 / #13	#76 / #13	104.5 (522.3, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	293.7 (355.6, 355.2, 300.9, 297.2, 159.7)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Majordomo Executus	#573 / #15	#112 / #20	56.4 (281.9, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	266.0 (388.1, 353.4, 243.0, 214.9, 130.7)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25
Ragnaros	#534 / #14	#74 / #10	103.0 (514.8, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0)	233.2 (301.8, 271.0, 252.4, 211.3, 129.4)	<a href="#">view</a>	<a href="#">view</a>	25

**Figure 3.12: A character profile in RealmPlayers for a Druid. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016)**

## Contextualizing My Play on Nostalrius Begins

Throughout my analysis of play on Nostalrius Begins, I reference various events, sites, and practices that require context to understand. In this section, I briefly summarize my play on Nostalrius, to paint a picture of the server as I experienced it, and to narratively explain specific events that I analytically explore in later chapters.

When I created an account on the Nostalrius Begins server in April of 2015, my initial motivations were to re-experience World of Warcraft as I had remembered it as a player. However, I quickly realized this site was rich with experiences from thousands of other World of Warcraft exiles, and I began documenting my play experiences.

When I began my research, I had recently joined Roasted Quail<sup>3</sup>, a guild run by a small group of friends who were, coincidentally, also former members of the Moonfall server. Roasted Quail aspired to finish all available raiding content with a group of competent, friendly, and

<sup>3</sup> Roasted Quail, Rumble Raiders, and Impetus are all pseudonymous guild names.

mature raiders. Beyond the leadership core, Roasted Quail's members tended to be friends of friends or small clusters from other guilds on the server. Most were attracted to the server to re-experience old content, but some of our younger members were experiencing the content for the first time. There were roughly 175 members in the guild, but our roster fluctuated.

I made the guild aware of my interest in the game as a researcher, and worked to keep a level of transparency with the guild to inform them about my research. All members of Roasted Quail with whom I regularly interacted were receptive to my research, and some were actively invested in it. For example, one weekend while attending a conference to present my research, I posted on Roasted Quail's guild forums that I would be late to a raiding event since I would still be at the conference. In a later comment, another guild member said: “[I can't make the raid because] too much [homework] didn't get done this week. If I happen to get online I can go, but I'm thinking it won't happen. Plus, you know, I might spend time reading Gazzi's paper... same format, vastly different subject at least! [link] Of course, I'm assumming she can edit my comment if she didn't want that there...but it was public with a search... ;)”

In December 2015, Roasted Quail defeated the last boss of Blackwing Lair, Nefarian, completing all of the content that was available on Nostalrius at the time (Figure 3.13). For the first kill, we were not even at full raid capacity, defeating Nefarian with only 38 players! Roasted Quail had become a guild of skilled and dedicated players that were able to overcome the most challenging boss in the game, even without a full roster of raid attendees.



**Figure 3.13: Roasted Quail posing after the first Nefarian kill.**

But this final success pushed the leadership to focus more on efficiency. They issued several measures for the guild to focus on: reducing the time needed to kill each boss, reducing the idle time between fights, and increasing damage and healing output from raiders. Though raids were successful, Roasted Quail sometimes struggled to fill a 40-man raid group, as evidenced by our first Nefarian kill. Without a full raid, we were attempting fights at less than ideal standards. While these sub-optimal raid groups could still defeat bosses, they could not do so to the new standards that the guild leadership promoted.

Eventually, Roasted Quail merged with another guild, Rumble Raiders. The leadership wanted to broaden the roster of active raiders and meet the new standards for success that they had established. This merger was a point of contention for many members of Roasted Quail. The new guild, aptly named Impetus, focused on high-speed, efficient runs, without much concern for sociality within the guild.

For a variety of reasons, such as my performance as a player and the time required of me for other activities, I found that during the last few months of my ethnography I was no longer being invited to raid activities with Impetus. In February 2016, I ended my ethnography of Nostalrius by posting a message to the Impetus guild website thanking the players for their time, giving them information about my dissertation, and providing my contact information so that they could follow up with me if they desired.



## CHAPTER 4: Methods

Ethnography is “an approach for studying everyday life as lived by groups of people... not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Because I was interested in the lived experiences of players, ethnographic methods were most likely to provide relevant data for analysis. The goal of ethnographic research “is not to determine how controlled variables account for difference, but to trace and interpret the complex currents of everyday life that comprise our collective lived experiences as human beings” (Boellstorff et al., 2012). I used ethnographic methods because lived experiences do not have variables that can be cleanly isolated and removed. Instead, I used ethnographic methods to highlight the holistic play experience and better discuss the complex intersection of aspects of daily life, game design, and sociality.

It is important to note that ethnography is not a single method, but a collection of techniques used to holistically examine daily life. Throughout data collection, I investigated forums, performed interviews, accessed archives (and created some of my own!), read social media posts, and played WoW as a participant observer alongside other players.

A key method for ethnographic research is participant observation. Boellstorff et al. (2012) explain: “Participant observation is built on the alignments between engaging in everyday activities, on one hand, and recording and analyzing those activities, on the other... We cannot pick one or the other. Good participant observation means play and research in parallel, as the same engaged activity.” In participant observation, the ethnographer observes a culture in which she is immersed, but also in which she participates. As a participant observer, I performed tasks as both a researcher and a player. I developed social relationships with many of the other players in my guilds and on the server.

For the rest of this chapter, I describe the techniques that comprised my ethnographic inquiry of play experiences in World of Warcraft, including: participant observation via ethnography, contextual analysis of forums and social media posts, and semi-structured interviews.

### Participant Observation: Nostalrius Begins

I performed an ethnography of the Nostalrius Begins private server from June 2015 to February 2016 as a participant observer. My methods of participant observation follow Strathern's (2004), Nardi's (2010), and Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) guidelines for "participant observation" in virtual worlds. Participation included playing the game with other players, reading the official forums for the server, reading my guild's forums, reading guides for my class (Druid) and strategies for various boss fights, and spending time with players in voice-over IP programs – sometimes playing on Nostalrius Begins, sometimes playing other games, and sometimes just chatting. The techniques I used included those of standard ethnographic pursuits: interviews, observation, participant observation, informal conversation, and document analysis. However, I also included contemporary methods specific to the game, such as screenshots, chatlogs, in-game mails, and video streams (via Twitch.tv), to provide a more holistic understanding of the play experience. I kept digital field notes for my play, including guild meetings, current events, and personal thoughts on the play experience. Though I was a member of several guilds during my play on Nostalrius, I focus on the experience of two: Roasted Quail and Impetus. Both guild names are pseudonymous.

### Forum Posts: Nostalrius Begins & World of Warcraft

In-game play is only one aspect of the play experience. Many player discussions about gameplay and social experience occur outside of the game itself. To garner a broader

understanding of player experience, I analyzed the official World of Warcraft forums (at <https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/>) and the official Nostalrius Begins forums (at <http://forum.nostalrius.org/>). While the data from the forums are useful and provide meaningful insights into players' opinions, it is important to note that opinions expressed on the forums may represent a "vocal minority." They are not necessarily representative of what all or most players think. However, these posts are important because they allow users to publically discuss their opinions as a community (Bruckman, 2002).

Posts on the World of Warcraft forums that I analyzed were often months or years old. Some discussions took place long after the release of a particular feature. The outcomes of design changes that altered the play experience, such as the introduction of cross-server interactions, were not always instantaneous. Instead, they occurred after the new system(s) had been in place for some time.

I read the Nostalrius forums multiple times a week to stay current with community events and discussions. Since the Nostalrius community was less than a year old throughout my ethnography and I was playing the game while the development team released new changes and updates, reading the forums became an important part of the ethnography. If I discovered a particularly relevant or long thread (e.g., "What made you quit retail?" from the Nostalrius forums; at <https://forum.nostalrius.org/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=26762>), I bookmarked the page to access in the future. Later, I transferred the textual data to Microsoft Excel – organizing similar thread topics together and categorizing posts in these threads according to thematic content for analysis purposes.

I studied posts on the official World of Warcraft and Nostalrius Begins forums to understand players' opinions about social experience in WoW, social experience in Nostalrius,

and why players had chosen Nostalrius over other private servers. Using the forums' search function, I queried for terms like: "social experience," "sociality," "player experience," "cross-realm zones," "group finder," "private servers," "vanilla," and "golden age." Together, these terms brought forward threads with players' discussions about social experience in World of Warcraft, specifically in relation to certain game features and the popularity of private servers. I chose terms based on players' discussions of these topics, including any associated acronyms or abbreviations for search terms (e.g., LFR for "Looking for Raid"). In some quotes, I expand these terms or replace them with simpler words in brackets to assist the reader.

Sometimes forums can function as a site for discussion between players and developers. It is clear that Blizzard attends to their forums, as they have sometimes responded to various topics – on the forums or through later announcements. For example, two weeks after the closure of Nostalrius Begins, J. Allen Brack, a lead producer for World of Warcraft, started a thread titled "To the WoW Community" to address the rising concerns from the players about Nostalrius (at <https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20743584206>). Similarly, the Nostalrius Begins development team is able to see and reply to player concerns on their official forums. While player-developer interactions most frequently occurred on their "Support" forum for reporting bugs, glitches, or account access problems, many announcement posts resulted in active discussions between the development team and the player community.

Because the forums are publicly accessible, there is no privacy concern for using these data. There is no language on either the official World of Warcraft forums or the Nostalrius Begins forums that provides any guidelines for how posts may or may not be used, and all posts are accessible without logging into the forum or webpage, making these data publically available to anyone on the Internet.

## Facebook: Moonfall 4 Life & Nostalrius Begins

I examined posts on Facebook to understand what types of content players shared with one another, what types of communities players formed and managed outside of the game, and, for both Nostalrius Begins and World of Warcraft, how developers engaged with their players. In this section, I provide information about Moonfall 4 Life, a Facebook group for a server community from retail World of Warcraft, and the official Nostalrius Begins Facebook page.

### ***Moonfall 4 Life***

I played World of Warcraft on the Moonfall realm from late 2005 to 2009. At the time, I was in high school. I was invited to join the Moonfall 4 Life Facebook group in February 2014. However, this time I entered the community as researcher, and quickly established my identity as such through posts on the group page. There are many server-based community groups like Moonfall 4 Life. Searches on Facebook reveal groups for servers from WoW and other MMOs such as Guild Wars 2 and Wildstar. Because I had access to this particular Facebook group as a former player and member of the server, I studied Moonfall 4 Life as a way to understand server community and player relationships.

I received notifications for posts in the group through daily usage of Facebook, and read posts for several months before beginning to organize and analyze their content for research purposes. I performed an in-depth, qualitative analysis of Facebook posts from February 2014 until April 2016. I categorized posts in Microsoft Excel by topic, references to WoW, and interactions between members. The hundreds of posts and comments from the Facebook group easily filled more than 50 pages worth of material. I focused on posts that critiqued changes that players believed altered the social experience and posts that emphasized the sense of community

in Moonfall. For some posts, like Figure 4.1, I retained anonymized screenshots of the original post and subsequent comments to show reactions via “likes.”



**Figure 4.1: A sample screenshot of a post on Moonfall 4 Life.**

I used SurveyMonkey to gather information about player demographics, including: age, gender, current occupation, educational background; character demographics, including: race, class, name, and character information; and play practices, including: subscription information, when players began playing, times they left the game, and server affiliations. Eighty-five of the most active members in the group responded to the survey, with 82 completing the entire survey.

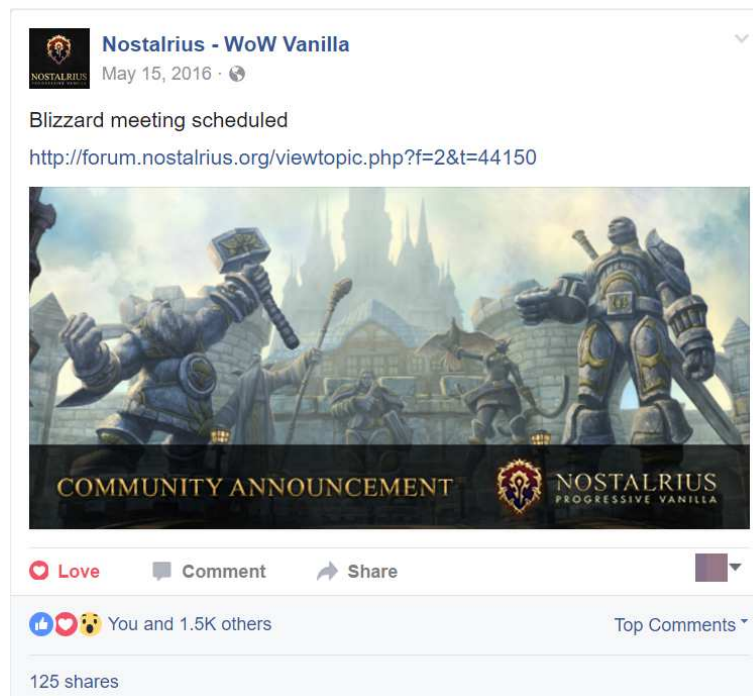
Active members were those who had notifications for the group turned on, and checked the page regularly. Players were between 18–51 years old ( $x \approx 29$ ), with 24% identifying as female and 76% identifying as male. Educational backgrounds ranged from less than a high school degree to graduate and professional degrees, with the majority having at least some college education. Participants held a variety of occupations, including students, housewives, software engineers, marketing executives, nurses, and food service workers.

All participants consented to the use of their character names in my publications. I anonymized other names including Facebook display names and other players' offline names. I did not want to risk identifying my participants by their offline names to protect their identities. However, character names often served as important identifiers in posts and comments on the Moonfall 4 Life page. I wanted to retain these names in analysis to look at communication and identification practices when multiple identifiers were available. For example, when using a system like Facebook where players are identified by a “real” name, there were still situations where people chose to refer to each other by their character names. A portion of Moonfall 4 Life members also played on Nostalrius Begins when it was released.

### ***Nostalrius Begins***

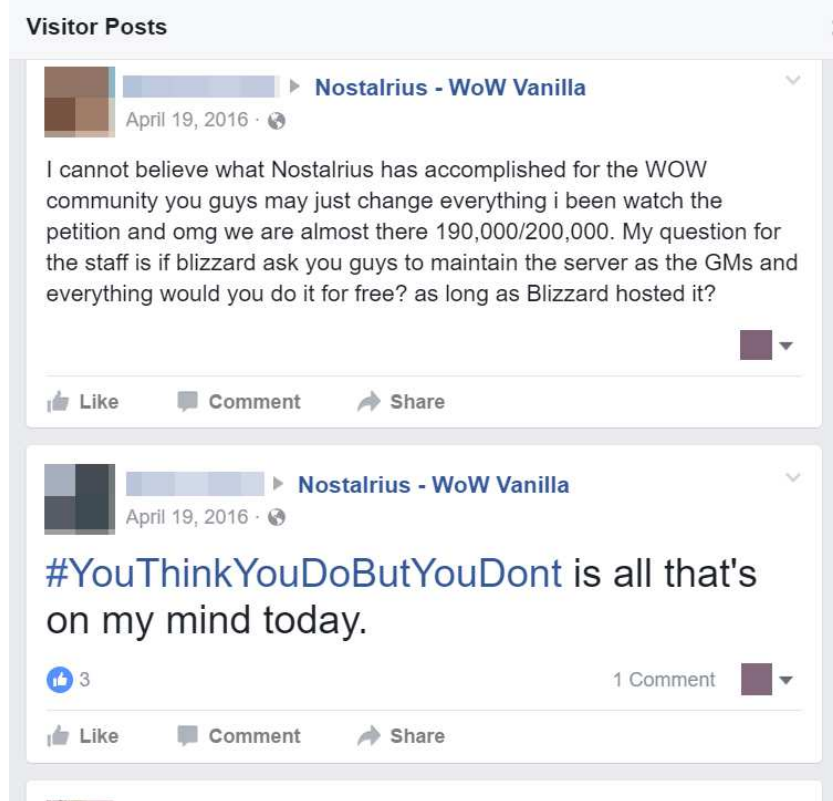
Nostalrius Begins hosts a Facebook page (at <https://www.facebook.com/NostalBegins/>) to provide announcements and updates to the player-base. While all posts on the page itself are from the Nostalrius Begins team (Figure 4.2), there is also a section for “Visitor Posts” (Figure 4.3) from community members and players. I performed an in-depth, qualitative analysis of Facebook posts created by the Nostlarius team and comments on those posts from the community from April 2015 to January 2017. I categorized official posts in Microsoft Excel by topic. However, many posts were community announcements that redirected to the Nostalrius

forums, and frequently overlapped with my analysis of the Nostalrius forum posts. Often, these posts focused on new additions to Nostalrius, changes to the server, and, later, the status of the private server community following the game's closure. No names, character names or Facebook display names, were retained for this analysis.



**Figure 4.2: An example of an official post from the Nostalrius team on Facebook.**





**Figure 4.3: Examples of Visitor Posts on the Nostalrius Facebook page.**

## Interviews

I conducted semi-structured, audio-taped interviews with eight Nostalrius Begins players. All interviewees were in both Roasted Quail and Impetus; that is, they started in Roasted Quail and stayed with the guild after its reformation into Impetus. Interviews took place remotely via the voice over IP program Skype, and were recorded using MP3 Skype Recorder. A research assistant transcribed all interviews in Microsoft Word. Following transcription, I coded each interview based on recurrent themes across the series of interviews for analysis purposes.

Remote interviews allowed interviewees to participate *in situ* from the comfort of their own homes. VOIP-based communication is the norm for many MMO players, so this method worked well for data collection purposes. Communication over VOIP programs is frequently a

normal part of daily life in MMOs, whether those programs are used for raids, battlegrounds, questing, or simply chatting with other players.

All potential interview participants were asked to read a study information sheet with my contact information prior to interviews that stated the goals of the study and the use of collected data. The study information sheet contained information confirming that the individual consented to the use of their character name, aggregate data, direct interview quotes, and forum posts for any presentations, reports, or publications.

I recruited participants from the guild forums for Impetus and through in-game chat. I made a new thread on the guild forum with information about the study in February 2016, following the conclusion of my ethnographic data collection. The post invited questions on the thread itself, via email, or through the forum's private messaging system. After confirming that a potential participant was interested, a date and time for the interview was established via email or the forums' private messaging system. My email and phone information were provided for any questions or concerns potential interviewees needed to express after the interview concluded. I performed all interviews in March 2016. No data from private messages or emails were collected for research purposes unless the player gave express consent for the use of that content.

Interviews with Nostalrius players covered their play experience and characters on World of Warcraft, their play experience and characters on Nostalrius Begins, their perceptions of the guild with which they were affiliated, and general demographic information. Since all participants were members of Roasted Quail and Impetus, they were asked to speak about their experiences during the guild merger to contextualize their play experience over time. All character names referencing members of Roasted Quail or Impetus are pseudonymous.

I also attempted to interview the Nostalrius Begins developers. I used the Nostalrius Begins forum's private message function to discuss possible interviews with Nostalrius Begins developers. My email and phone information were provided for any questions or concerns potential interviewees needed to express. However, I was unable to confirm a time to interview either Viper or Daemon either via VOIP program or text.

## Summary

Boellstorff et al. (2012) outline many benefits of employing ethnographic methods in virtual worlds research including the combination of etic and emic<sup>4</sup> data, the valuing of players' meaning-making practices, the consideration of societal influences on data, and the contextualization of data within a naturalistic setting.

Ethnographic methods allowed me to inform my etic documentation of play as a researcher with players' emic accounts of their own play experiences, thus affording the ability to support observations with firsthand stories from players. I worked to accurately represent these emic experiences throughout the data that I present. For example, all textual data, including chat logs, forum posts, Facebook posts, and text messages are written verbatim, retaining individual spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors in players' quotes to preserve the original intent and form of expression of the message. Terminology, such as 20-man and 40-man raid, are emic terms that the players themselves used to discuss activities and events, and we adopt these terms as they are universally used in World of Warcraft. Ethnographic work highlights players' own understanding of their experiences as valuable and important ways of understanding meaning making. In my work, I tried to empower my players by reporting on their experiences accurately, which means listening to what they said and incorporating their understandings of

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<sup>4</sup> Etic data refers to analyses from the perspective of the researcher, while emic data refers to information from the perspective of the participants.

events into my analyses as a researcher. As a method that emphasizes holistic experience, ethnographic inquiry allowed me to consider how wider societal constructs shape everyday life and behaviors. In this study, because I was interested in the effects of the neoliberal ideology on play practices and social experience, ethnographic methods allowed me to consider ideological influences on the data that I collected. Individual and collective experiences are emergent, contextual, and constantly shifting, but ethnography lets us examine and understand this messiness firsthand in a naturalistic setting. For these reasons, ethnographic methods allowed for the most ethical and comprehensive data collection for my work.

## **CHAPTER 5: Game Design Mediates Social Experience**

In this chapter, I address the ways that game design mediates players' social experiences through social affordances. By "mediation" in this case, I refer to the ways in which social affordances can manipulate, direct, and shape the relationships between a game and its players. These player-game relationships are complex because they can affect not only the way that a player engages with the game, but also the way that a player interacts with others. A seemingly benign change to a game's design can sometimes cause dramatic changes to the social affordances provided by the system, the social experience of the players, and the subjective experience of the game itself. I address the ways that changing the design of a game and its systems can influence players' behaviors. In World of Warcraft, many of these design changes were intended to expedite the process of play by reducing the amount of time players spent idle and increasing the number of activities that players could perform together. But with changes to design come tradeoffs – sometimes in the form of unintended consequences (Nardi, 2012; Nelson & Stolterman, 2003; Winner, 1978). Often, "the larger the system the more unpredictable the tradeoffs and unintended consequences" (Nardi, 2012). When adjusting the design of a game with millions of players, unintended consequences can have cataclysmic effects. I analyze an example of a social community prior to changes to WoW's social affordances and players' reactions to two changes to World of Warcraft that made the process of play more efficient, in some ways at the expense of the social and collaborative environment in the game.

When Blizzard released WoW in late 2004, the game was challenging, and required players to collaborate in groups to complete certain tasks. Many have found that Vanilla WoW encouraged social interactions and fostered robust social experiences (Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015; Winkie, 2015). Later versions of the game introduced changes that were intended to

make play easier, but also altered the game's social affordances. Though an easier game is arguably more accessible to a wider audience, some players felt that the changes negatively affected their social experience by removing or reducing the amount of collaboration and communication required (O'Connor et al., 2015; Wokendreamer, 2013). In an interview with Polygon after the release of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion, Tom Chilton, a lead designer for WoW, said: "We would have been in bad shape had we not [made the game appeal to a wider audience]...People who played Vanilla [WoW] always say, 'If it had stayed the same, I would have the same fun now as I did then.' But that's not true. Audiences always evolve"(Gera, 2013). However, Blizzard's declining subscription numbers over the past few years (Kollar, 2015; MMO-Champion, 2015) indicate that the "audience evolution" that Chilton refers to may be more nuanced than Blizzard thinks. For some players, this quote is one of many instances where Blizzard claimed to understand players' desires better than the players themselves.

Despite the WoW designer's claims, many players felt that changes to WoW were negatively affecting their enjoyment of the game and hindering the social experience that WoW previously provided (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012; Eklund & Johansson, 2010, 2013; Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015). For example, O'Connor et al. (2015) found that WoW players developed a sense of community, established social identities, and provided social support to others through the game. Though only two expansions had been released by the time O'Connor et al. collected their data, players were already complaining about the declining social experience in WoW and reflecting on "the good old days." Players attributed the increase in individualistic play to "changes to the game that...made it more accessible to a wider audience...[and] reduced the sense of community among players" (O'Connor et al., 2015). One of O'Connor's participants said: "*It was easy to get help [in Vanilla WoW]... [But when you ask a question now], everyone's*

*response is, 'Use Google, dickhead.' Instead of going 'Oh yeah it's over here.'"* Some changes that made the game "more accessible to a wider audience" decreased the need for collaboration and communication, altering the sense of community and the ways that players interacted. These changes resulted in what players perceived as a rise in playing alone rather than collaborating with other players. These changes mediated the relationship between players and the game (e.g., players arguing that the game is not as fun as it used to be), and between the players themselves (e.g., how players interact and communicate with one another).

### ***Examining Reactions to Mediation through Game Design***

I examine the effects of changes to World of Warcraft to document the ways in which game design can mediate social experiences. First, I document the history of two features that markedly changed World of Warcraft's social affordances and the play experiences. Then, I analyze player reactions to and reflections on these features. Blizzard hosts public forums for its games that allow players to express their concerns and debate with peers, while affording Blizzard the ability to make public statements to players. As more changes altered the game, players began to voice their concerns on WoW's forums (Nardi, 2010). To understand how these changes affected players' social experiences, I analyzed posts on the World of Warcraft official forums.

The first feature, "Group Finder," is an automated interface that changed how players found others and created teams for group activities. Group Finder completely reformed the practice of group formation for collaborative activities in World of Warcraft by changing who was allowed to group together, what the rewards of collaborative activities were, where group formation occurred in game, when players were allowed to attempt certain collaborative

activities, why players chose to engage in collaborative activities, and how players interacted with one another in groups.

The second feature, “cross-realm zones,” refers to geographic “zones” or areas of the game that were changed to allow players from multiple servers (sometimes called “realms” in WoW) to interact. Though cross-realm zones did not alter how these areas of the game functioned, they did substantially change the game in changing who was able to interact in certain areas of the game, what types of interactions were possible between two players in the same space, when players were allowed to interact, why players might experience difficulties in particular zones, and how players interacted with one another in a zone.

I explain what Group Finder and cross-realm zones are, when these features were introduced and how they changed over time, why Blizzard introduced them, how they function, and their effects on social experience. This analysis builds on prior literature examining design as a mediating factor in social experience and collaboration in online games (Dabbish et al., 2012; Eklund & Johansson, 2010, 2013; Kjastrup, 2008; Simon, Boudreau, & Silverman, 2009).

### ***Examining Life Before Change***

Knowing that features like Group Finder and cross-realm zones changed the social experience of World of Warcraft is meaningless without an example from before these changes were introduced for comparison. Thus, I provide a case study of “Moonfall 4 Life,”<sup>5</sup> a Facebook group for veteran members of the Moonfall World of Warcraft server. Described as a place “for those folks who met many moons ago on a lame duck WoW server called Moonfall,” the group allowed current and former members of the server to connect and communicate outside World of Warcraft. One player created the group in February 2014, and through friend-of-a-friend

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<sup>5</sup> “Moonfall” and “Moonfall 4 Life” are pseudonyms, and have been used to protect the identities of the players.



invitations, the group surged to over 1,000 members at one point. Players had retained WoW-related materials that were up to 10 years old, including screenshots, videos, chat logs, and other media that they shared within the group. Though some posts concerned contemporary World of Warcraft issues, many discussed events from when the community played together from roughly 2004 through 2010. Moonfall 4 Life became a place where players could relive old memories, reminisce about the game, archive game-related media, share community-relevant stories, explore new games together, and, perhaps most importantly, catch up with each other's personal lives, including births, deaths, marriages, and other significant events. The group was not just a venue for nostalgia, but a site to maintain a community.

I examine Moonfall 4 Life to provide context for the types of communities that were once prevalent in World of Warcraft before changes that players argue altered the social experience. While relationships like those on Moonfall 4 Life were the norm at one time in World of Warcraft (Chen, 2012; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Eklund & Johansson, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2015; Poor & Skoric, 2016; Williams et al., 2006; Yee, 2014), over time, these communities of strangers turned friends have become fewer and farther between (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2015). Players frequently attribute this shift to changes in game design that altered the social experience of the game – namely, the social affordances that WoW provides. Indeed, many discussions on Moonfall 4 Life addressed the decline of social experience following specific changes to World of Warcraft (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2015).

While social experience in World of Warcraft is central, it is also fragile and vulnerable to changes in the system. Unintended consequences of changes designed to expedite play have affected the social experience of the game in a way that the World of Warcraft community has

noticed. Players report that these changes have contributed to a decline in sociality. Some did not mind this decline, as the game was easier and more efficient to play, while others were disappointed and felt that something important had been lost. In this chapter, I further analyze the dichotomy between players to better understand changes in social experience as a result of altered social affordances. To understand social experience, we must examine not only how players are interacting, but the designed environment and affordances of the space in which they are interacting (Eklund & Johansson, 2013; Klastrop, 2008; Livingstone, 2002).

Many affordances in World of Warcraft support social experience: multiple text-based chat channels, animated “emotes” that cause characters to perform nonverbal actions (waving, crying, dancing, bowing, and so on), mechanisms for tracking friends, and indicators of who among guild mates and friends is currently online. These affordances foster social bonds, and encourage players to develop ties of friendship which form the basis for collaborative play. By examining the Moonfall 4 Life group, I demonstrate what sociality looked like in the early years of World of Warcraft. However, changes such as Group Finder and cross-realm zones, which afforded a more streamlined play experience also altered the social experience, and created varying opinions in the player community about what WoW should be like. These changes altered how all players interacted with World of Warcraft and with one another. The resulting change in social experience was disappointing for many players. Blizzard continues to change and modify these features, and the most recent expansion, *Legion*, introduces several important changes that I address at the end of this chapter.

### Group Finder

One way that the social experience in World of Warcraft changed came with the introduction of tools to streamline the process of finding groups for in game activities, such as

dungeons and raids. I begin by outlining the history of these tools, which is fairly complex and nuanced. An additional discussion of the history of group creation tools can be found in Eklund and Johansson's (2013) work.

### ***History***

When Blizzard released WoW, players used chat channels to find others for collaborative group activities. One chat channel, referred to as Looking for Group (or LFG for short), allowed players in specific areas of the game to find others with whom to play. However, the restricted nature of the channel frequently made finding groups difficult. Instead, many players opted to advertise their groups on the Trade chat channel. This channel was only available in major cities and allowed for communication with many players at once. However, this meant that the channel's original purpose, that is, advertising for players who wanted to buy, sell, or trade specific goods, was often obfuscated by players looking to form groups for dungeon activities.

In March 2005 (Patch 1.3.0), Blizzard implemented "Meeting Stones," large pillars located outside of a dungeon that players could interact with to join a queue for that particular dungeon. But many players did not use the stones because they required extensive travel to remote dungeons, and did not guarantee one would find a group. In January 2006 (Patch 1.9.0), Blizzard merged the LFG channel and the Trade channel and made them both global. That is, players could now broadcast their group advertisements, goods or services to any one located in their faction's capital cities (e.g., Ironforge or Ogrimmar), as long as they too were located within a capital city.

With the release of *The Burning Crusade*, World of Warcraft's first expansion, Blizzard made additional changes to group finding. In December 2006 (Patch 2.0.1), Blizzard removed the LFG channel, and introduced the Looking For Group interface. This tool allowed players to

join a queue of other players looking to perform specific in-game activities. The Meeting Stones previously introduced were changed to “Summoning Stones” that allow players to “summon,” or teleport, other players in their group to the beginning of the dungeon. Some felt that the interface for finding other players removed opportunities for social interactions that the chat channels, though time-consuming, had encouraged through direct, personal interactions. Others argued that the Summoning Stones encouraged laziness in groups, as two players in a group of five were required to summon the others – many simply wanted to be summoned rather than spend their time trekking to the dungeon. Already, the effects of these changes on player interactions were visible. Over time, the LFG interface was refined to re-allow access to the LFG channel (May 2007; Patch 2.1.0) and allow players to specify their class role according to the three main archetypes in WoW: Tank, Healer, and Damage Per Second (DPS) (April 2009; Patch 3.1.0). Figure 5.1 shows an example of what players saw when this new change was implemented. Through algorithmic assignment, players are sorted into a random activity, with an assigned role, with an emphasis on the rewards that can be obtained.



**Figure 5.1: A dialog box asks a player to accept a dungeon assignment. (my screenshot)**

In December 2009 (Patch 3.3.0) the interface was renamed to “Dungeon Finder,” and a rewards system was integrated into the interface, which provided additional items or gold (in-

game currency) to players who successfully performed a dungeon with a group created through the interface. Now there was more incentive to play with strangers than friends or guildmates. However, the most important change that came with the modifications to Dungeon Finder was the decision to allow players from multiple servers into a single group. Smaller clusters of servers, known as “Battlegroups” were combined to create a larger pool of players for creating groups. Previously, players were restricted to interacting only with players on their server “making each realm a separate world where different norms and cultures could arise” (Eklund & Johansson, 2013). While this larger pool of players decreased wait times to perform in-game activities, it also meant that players from significantly different servers could now interact, often without concerns for behavior. For example, while previously a player might continue to interact with others after performing a dungeon, with the new Dungeon Finder tool, this was no longer the case. Thus, many players were no longer concerned about maintaining reputations and relationships with others in their groups because they were strangers whom the player would likely never see again (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2014b). While Dungeon Finder was created specifically to cater to 5-man dungeon activities, additional interfaces were added in August 2012 (Patch 5.0.4) for Raids (Raid Finder), Scenarios (Scenario Finder), and Challenges (Challenge Mode). In October 2014, these interfaces were bundled together into a new system, dubbed “Group Finder”. Group Finder has been in place since, though minor changes have been made periodically. Many of these changes affected the process of finding others for collaborative activities, and often shifted the actions required for finding others to impersonal interfaces in which players were automatically, algorithmically matched.



**Figure 5.2: A timeline of changes to the process of group finding in World of Warcraft.**

### *Player Reactions*

The WoW community was divided on whether Group Finder was a boon or a curse. Some players expressed concern on the forums that Group Finder changed how people interacted and turned play activities into “chores:”

*“I’ve been in countless dungeons where people just don’t talk. It’s like they’re unwillingly trudging thru everything, aren’t there to socialize...Feels like more of a chore than entertainment.”*

Many players argued that the social experience was part of the “*charm that came from MMOs*” and contributed to the game’s appeal. These players felt that Group Finder diminished communication and decreased loyalty to a group: “*Welcome to dungeon finder, where the loot is made up and the people don’t matter.*” Some players concluded that automated groups created a disregard for fellow players, which resulted in the objectification of human players as “bots” or computer programs: “*[Random Dungeon Finder] or [Raid Finder] could put me with bots and I wouldn’t know the difference. No one talks, they just [kill] the bosses and leave.*”

The social experience in group activities had devolved to minimal instrumental interaction, and sometimes, as this player indicated, no interaction at all. Because the system

could quickly place a player into a group, players began abandoning unsuccessful groups. One player, frustrated with the widespread acceptance of group abandonment, suggested a rating system to mitigate bad behavior:

*“I have noticed that people will often abandon groups upon the slightest failure or death that requires a do-over...I find that the overall attitude of some people...is very poor, and that they should start receiving negative feedback if they continue to treat other people only as a means to their selfish end.”*

Others claimed that anti-social behaviors were human nature. Some speculated that the players, not the systems, “ruined social interaction:”

*“If people had to be forced to speak to one another by a game mechanic, did they ever actually want to be social anyway? Everyone wants to blame [Looking for Group] for ruining social interaction, but nothing at all is stopping any of us from being friendly...except us.”*

To test whether players could continue to be friendly after adapting to a new system, one player performed a social experiment to subvert Group Finder. In a thread called “The Empty Friend List Experiment,” the player explained that she would only perform group activities if the group was formed “the old fashioned way” through chat channels. She described the results:

*“I formed exactly zero [dungeon] groups using the old school method...Some responses I received were rather polite, such as ‘if youre looking to run a dungeon you can just use the [Looking for Dungeon] thing...its what everyone does now,’ and others not so much (‘press the i key noob’<sup>6</sup> was my absolute favorite)...When I explained my reasons for not using the [Looking for Dungeon] method [players] tended to either wish me luck or flat out tell me it was hopeless to form a group in such an outdated fashion.”*

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase “press the i key noob” refers to the fact that the Looking for Dungeon system could be accessed by pressing “I” on the keyboard, with this player using a derogatory term (i.e., “noob”) to refer to the other player’s inexperience.

This player actively tried to resist Group Finder to recreate the social experience that she believed happened through “old school” group finding. While it was not impossible to return to more “outdated” methods, the community had willingly or unwillingly adopted Group Finder as the norm. Many players argued that even if they wanted to, it was impossible to find a group without using Group Finder. The post elicited many sympathetic responses: *“This post makes me sad, because I remember how it used to be too.”* The friendly sociality of group activities—making new friends and socializing with other players from one’s realm—had declined considerably. Some players believed that the issue was the player community’s compliance with the system: *“Too many people that basically want this to be a single player game nowadays. Sad how far the social aspect has fallen.”*

Other players acknowledged that Group Finder was useful, but still had room for improvement: *“While [Looking for Group] is a great way to break from questing, see content, and get the occasional gears, it feels like a very impersonal way of doing so.”* However, some were more skeptical:

*“Its easy to blame it on the tools, but the real blame lies with the players...I don’t blame automobiles for car crash deaths and I don’t blame cigarettes for lung cancer. It also bears mentioning that tools like [Looking for Raid], [Looking for Dungeon] [are] all driven by player demand and feedback. This community made the choice to have the path of least resistance at the cost of having to be part of a multiplayer community.”*

Some players reported that they had active social lives with small groups of friends or within their guilds, and because they saw Group Finder as convenient for certain goals, it was acceptable, even with the deterioration of social experience. As one player said: *“Spamming trade chat to try to form a dungeon group was dumb and I am glad that [Looking for Dungeon]*



*made that obsolete. I barely ever did dungeon runs outside of my guild and small circle of friends back then and for good reason.”* For some, changes like Group Finder were a logical next step for improving play in World of Warcraft, regardless of the impact on social experience.

These posts show that the community was not unified in the decision to convert to a new system. It should be noted that adoption does not imply acceptance, and while players used Group Finder, many of them did not enjoy it. One player posted: *“Using it and liking it are not the same thing.”* Though mediations to group finding practices were intended to improve the play experience by reducing the time players spent idle, as with any change in design, the new features came with unintended consequences. In the same way that the system did not change all at once, players’ behaviors did not change overnight. However, by prioritizing the efficiency of play, there were clear repercussions for the sociality of play. While intended to make play easier and allow players to experience more of the game by expediting the process of finding and forming a group, some felt that Group Finder was a hindrance to the game’s social life.

### Cross-Realm Zones

One of the changes to group formation practices that affected social experiences was the decision to allow players from multiple servers to interact. However, Group Finder was not the only in-game space to incorporate cross-server interactions. Cross-realm zones, or areas of the in-game geography that allowed players from multiple servers to interact, also changed the social dynamics of World of Warcraft.

### ***History***

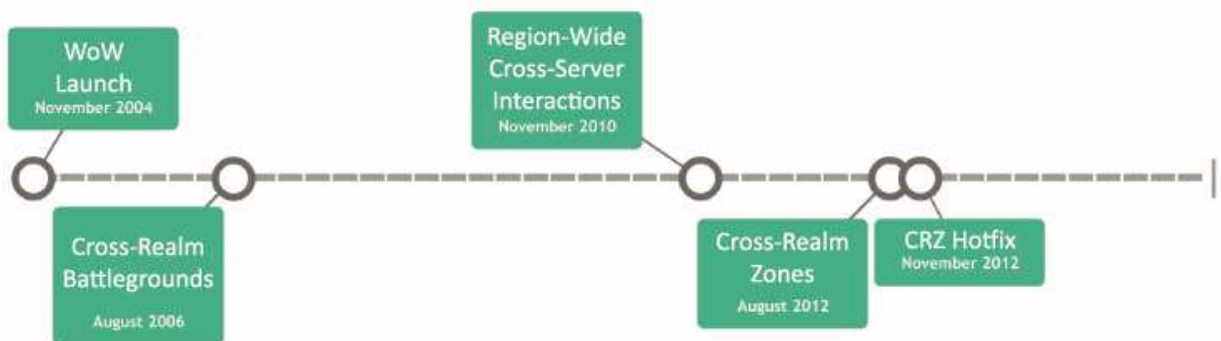
The first cross-server activities were Battlegrounds. In August 2006 (patch 1.12.0), Blizzard introduced the first of many changes meditating server-to-server interactions. Cross-server competitive activities, such as Battlegrounds and Arenas, allowed players to compete in

Player versus Player (PvP) combat with individuals from multiple servers. Though originally limited to servers in the same Battlegroup, that is, a cluster of roughly 20 servers, these cross-realm activities exponentially increased the number of players one might interact with, and reduced the wait time for certain activities. In November 2010 (Patch 4.0.3), Blizzard removed Battlegroups, and allowed players to encounter any other player from their region in PvP activities. Again, wait times for activities decreased, but players became anonymous faces in a crowd with these changes.

Another area of gameplay that was affected by cross-server interactions was questing. In August 2012 (Patch 5.0.4), Blizzard introduced “Cross-realm zones” to World of Warcraft, using “realm” to refer to the servers. Cross-realm zones are areas of the game geography that allow players from different servers to join groups and complete quests together. Blizzard created these zones because some players had complained that certain areas of the game were desolate, which made it difficult to find others with whom to play. Indeed, some quests, known as “Group Quests,” required that players enlist the help of others around them to defeat a particularly difficult enemy. However, in the frequently desolate portions of the ever expanding world of Azeroth, finding others was not always an easy task. In an announcement in May 2012, Blizzard explained: “Cross-realm zones give us the capability to ensure that...zones retain a [larger] population size” (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012). Cross-realm zones do not increase the number of people playing World of Warcraft, but populate geographical areas within the game with players from multiple servers.

Including more players in a zone afforded benefits such as ease of finding potential group members and opportunities for PvP combat outside of designated PvP areas (an activity that many players enjoy). However, cross-realm zones introduced new problems. First, while an

influx of players meant more potential group members, it also meant that there was a dramatic increase in competition for resources, such as rare enemies and resources including herbs and ore that occur naturally in the zones. Second, in some high population cross-realm zones, such as major cities, algorithms that dictate how many characters appear in a certain area to maintain server stability were not refined enough ensure party members were visible to one another. Thus, sometimes players in the same party would be unable to find each other. Third, there were frequently discrepancies between quests available to cross-realm groups. Certain quests, known as “Daily Quests,” require players to perform a certain action within 24 hours. Daily quests are randomly selected for an entire server each day, but some players found that they were unable to complete certain daily quests if members of group from other servers did not have the same quest. Instances of enemies and objects not appearing and loot not being generated were frequently reported, even after Blizzard introduced a hotfix for the issue in November 2012 (Patch 5.1.0). Finally, group members from different servers could not participate in certain social activities such as trading game items to one another, which removed some opportunities for sociality and problematized relationships between players on different servers.



**Figure Y: A timeline of changes to cross-realm interactions in World of Warcraft.**

## ***Player Reactions***

Designers hoped that implementing cross-realm zones would aggregate members from multiple realms and thus mediate social experience by increasing the number of potential group members and opportunities for player interactions. In practice, cross-realm zones reduced the sense of server community and created excessive competition for resources (such as the gathering of herbs and minerals). Arguments about cross-realm zones were abundant in the forums with some threads surpassing 650 pages of player opinions. Many players acknowledged that cross-realm zones had caused rifts in the player community: *“Yep, [cross-realm zone] sure is annoying...Don’t expect any sympathy on these forums though, the [cross-realm zone] lovers will eat your face off.”* Players have a number of motivations for play (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006a), and these motivators can contribute to differing ethos for play styles. For cross-realm zones, for example, player opinions were divided. One group believed that cross-realm zones were Blizzard’s response to complaints about the lack of people in some areas of the game. These players viewed cross-realm zones as beneficial:

*“CRZ (cross realm zones) were put in to make leveling zones feel populated. To give you some competition for quest mobs and resources. We complained for years that the leveling zones were empty. Now we complain that there are people in them. Blizzard just can’t win.”*

The second group consisted of players who were happier with less populated zones. While some of them recognized that cross-realm zones were a response to community complaints, they believed that the change did not address the problem. In response to the previous post, one player said:

*“The flawed argument ‘We complained for this and now we complain about the solution’ is such a tired and wrong argument...People who were previously ‘for’ said solution may have*

*turned against it when the implementation turned out to be pathetically flawed...I never asked for more people in zones and I hate [cross-realm zones]...Not everyone finds mouth frothing competition to be fun or compelling gameplay...Bring back real elites [monsters that require a group to slay], challenges, and elite subzones that require 'making friends'.*"

The latter group longed for the game as it once was, and believed that cross-realm zones were one symptom of a larger systematic issue affecting social experience. For example, the player above mentioned elements of leveling that required players to collaborate with one another, which led to "making friends." Another emphasized behavior changes after cross-realm zones:

*"It's like everyone is in their own world. I realize they are probably working on their quests or whatever... but it used to be you said 'hi' they would at least most of the time acknowledge you."*

Ironically, while cross-realm zones were designed to increase the number of players in an area and make the game world feel more alive, many players felt that cross-realm zones removed a sense of realm community, which detracted from the social experience:

*"People aren't connected to their server anymore ever since the big merge. You would hardly see the same people since they are from different servers so that's why people are anti-social these days. Back then when it was just your server it felt like home and it felt like a community since you interacted with the same people on that server only."*

As this player notes, even though the game world may *feel* less empty because it is populated with other characters, it was still *functionally* empty. In cross-realm zones, other players are little more than cardboard stands that are intended to give the illusion of social presence (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Farzan et al., 2011; Kreijns et al., 2004).

Once a player is done with their individual tasks in an area, these other people fade away with the landscape as the player moves on to new questing zones.

Other players tried to socialize with their new cross-realm counterparts, but found that they were unable to interact through activities such as trading game items. One player listed specific altruistic behaviors that he had previously performed through trading, but no longer could: “C’mon, I can’t even: 1) Give them that [rare item] that would benefit them more [than] me, which I just looted 2) Give them some [low level] health/mana [potions] 3) Give them a spot of cash if they need it.” Sharing game money and beneficial items was no longer possible<sup>7</sup>. Cross-realm zones removed critical social affordances such as trading between players that cemented social bonds.

In September 2012, a Blizzard Community Manager listed several known problems with cross-realm zones on the official World of Warcraft forums, including “lack of realm community.” However, instead of mentioning concerns such as decreased communication and collaboration, the Community Manager only addressed population size and competition for resources:

*“We understand that players are concerned about [cross-realm zones] potentially impacting the sense of community. Cross-realm zones were intended to make lower level zones feel less empty, but may also impact other more populated zones. With more populated areas, we’re aware of concerns over increased competition for resource[s] as well as quest[s] and rare [enemies]. This is something that we’re in the process of evaluating.”*

While intended to foster sociality between players by increasing the number of players an individual can interact with, cross-realm zones introduced too many constraints to interactions

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<sup>7</sup> Removing opportunities for charitable behaviors also aligns heavily with neoliberal values, which I address further in Chapter 6.

between players of different servers and decentralized server community by amassing players from a variety of servers into areas of the game. Similar to the problems with Group Finder, rather than building a reputation within one's server community, players were now often interacting with complete strangers whom they were unlikely to interact with again. In some cases, players exhibited prejudice against individuals from servers different from their own. In an attempt to positively mediate social experience for players, Blizzard unintentionally created a system that allowed for biasing against members outside of one's server community.

### Social Experience in Moonfall 4 Life

By looking at reactions to Group Finder and cross-realm zones, it is clear that the social experience changed in a significant way for many players. But these data do not explain what social experience was like before these changes. What did server communities look like? How did players interact? To better understand the types of server communities that once flourished on World of Warcraft, I explore the Moonfall 4 Life group. At its peak in mid-2014, Moonfall 4 Life had grown to over 1,100 members through invitations of friends and friends of friends. At the time of writing, the group had over 970 members. In a survey I gave to the group, I found that a majority of the players (83%) began playing during Vanilla WoW (2004–2006), and 16% during the first expansion (2007–2008). Only 1% began after 2008.

Roughly half of the Moonfall group no longer had active World of Warcraft accounts, and many of those who did had created characters on new realms or moved their characters to different realms. If a majority of the group either no longer played the game or no longer played on Moonfall, why did they choose to join the group? My data suggest that they joined the Facebook group because past social experiences created a sense of community to which players were still attached. Instead of playing a game that had changed to encourage more individualistic

and effectively anonymous interactions, players decided to mediate sociality on their own through social media. One player summarized what many in the group felt—as evidenced by the number of “likes” on the Facebook post—*“I feel like, it was more than just the game. It was the community. The people who we’ve built a bond/ relationship with was what made the game fun. I know that’s what made me keep on playing.”*

Members reminisced about shared experiences by posting screenshots, videos, cached web pages, and stories about events from times when they had played together. The most common sentiment across posts was that the players missed each other: *“I hate the fact I actually miss you assholes.”* Another wrote: *“my god... so many people and so many memories on this post. I LOVE you all.”* But the scale to which these players were able to reconnect with each other was immense. A few weeks after the group was created, one player said: *“its funny to look back so many years down the road and realize what a big part of our life this stupid game was. [The group creator] invited some folks he was still connected with on a whim it seemed, a few days later theres more than 700 people interested in reconnecting.”*

To restore the sense of community, some members started threads to share and update personal information. In one thread, a player asked:

*“Hey Moonfall! What is it that you DO for life right now? Didja get married and have kids? Finish college? Graduate high school (for the youngin's).What do I do? I am a cook at a catering place and a swanky business club, and I will be finishing up culinary school with an AS and 4 certifications in the fall. Oh yes.”*

The thread received over 250 replies. Members updated each other on their lives, commented on others’ updates, and remarked on accomplishments. Several couples had married. Some had begun their relationships when they met on Moonfall (see (Nardi, 2010; Schiano et al.,



2011; Yee, 2014) on emotional connection in online games). One player posted: “*Satanika = Finished my psychology degree, married to [offline name] AKA Trolieo [another player from the realm], haha, with two kiddos!*” Some posts addressed academic experiences and careers:

*“Finished my Bachelor's in Psychology from University of Maine in December and now am starting work full time as a Behavioral Health Professional in a couple weeks. Basically I hang out with kids with developmental issues like autism ect and work with their family to have them reach goals and improve their behavior.”*

Many replies were congratulatory, and celebrated the achievements of the community. However, not all threads were light-hearted. One player created a thread commemorating deceased players from the realm: “*Let's not forget absent friends who passed on, as well: Lotion/Toomer – [offline name] | Cay – [offline name] Game on friends.*” Other players chimed in through the comments: “*I believe Furzi passed away too,*” “*Ariok as well.*” For some, this was the first they had heard of their online friends’ deaths. The thread became a place to share memories of those who had died: “*From time to time I think bout Ariok.. I used to run around Stormwind just so I can find him and [role play] walk towards him on the Worgen travel form.. He used to always freak out about that. Haha..*” Many players posted media that included the deceased to remember them and share their experiences with others from the realm.

Moonfall 4 Life also discussed contemporary World of Warcraft and the ways that the game had changed from when the group was playing together. One player tried to use the Facebook group to find people who were still playing WoW: “*Who actually is still on Moonfall and playing actively? I can't find ANYONE with this new realm merger. Need a real guild to join.*” While roughly half of the group no longer played WoW, seeing old memories and interacting as a group was nostalgic for many players. One player said: “*These screenshots are*

*killing my resolve. If WoW could be again what it was then, I'd be back in a heart beat.*" In a reply to this comment, several players addressed Group Finder and cross-realms zones as factors that diminished the play experience. One said: *"Cross-server [battlegrounds] may have improved the brutal queue times, but they shot the sense of 'community' in the face."* Another said:

*"Along with all of that, i really hate that they opened up all of the old areas to cross server zones. It feels impersonal now...like there was a kind of intimacy being [repeatedly killed] by some ass from your server that will never equal the acts of some random kid."*

Returning to the example from Chapter 1 of Old Ogrimmar versus New Ogrimmar, one player succinctly described the lively social atmosphere of the area directly in front of the city called "Durotar":

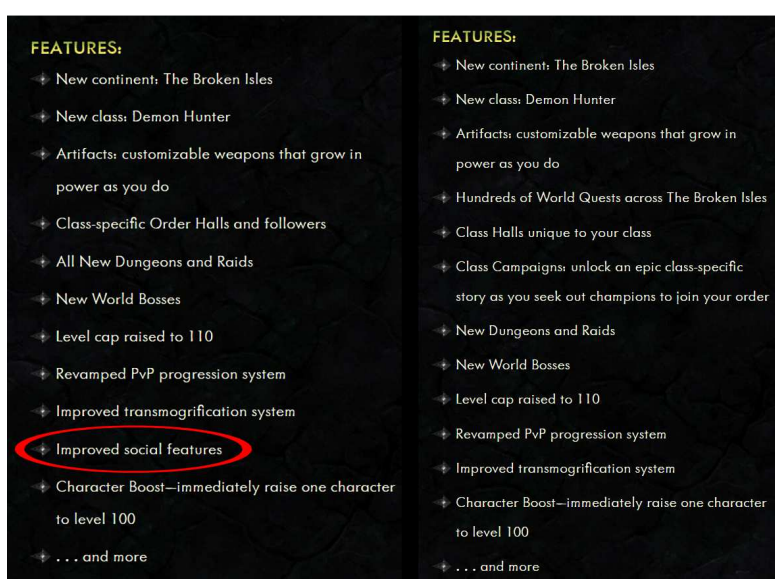
*"I do remember Durotar used to be the most POPPIN' damn thing around. You could walk out there at any time and see 20-30 plus people just WAITIN' in lines to duel. It was the shit at one point. One of the reasons I got away from the game. Everything became more spaced out, players became absent, the social network of the whole thing seemed to die off. :( Everyone out in [Durotar] knew everyone man."*

In another thread, players discussed what would need to change about World of Warcraft in order to get them to return. Almost immediately, the discussion focused on revisiting old content and returning to a version of the game prior to changes in how sociality was mediated, such as Group Finder and cross-realm zones. In the next chapter, I look at "private servers" – players' attempts to create the gaming experience that they want when World of Warcraft no longer offers it.

Moonfall players’ social experiences facilitated multi-year friendships, and sometimes romantic relationships. Many joined the group to continue interacting with people who lived far away, and who perhaps they had never met in person. Though many members of Moonfall 4 Life no longer played World of Warcraft, the stories they told and media they shared showed that the game created meaningful social experience and positive memories. Moonfall 4 Life members shared the same sentiments as players from the official forums – something about the game had changed to prioritize efficiency at the expense of sociality, and it left many players dissatisfied.

### Changes in Legion

Blizzard appears to be trying to address some of the players’ concerns surrounding the social experience in the game. For example, on their website announcing the launch of the *Legion* expansion, Blizzard advertised “improved social features.” Blizzard later removed this claim from the page with no additional comment (see Figure 5.4). *Legion* has, however, introduced several new features that address some of the concerns players have expressed about group-based activities.



**Figure 5.4: A list of features available in *Legion* from Blizzard’s website. Screenshot from August 2015 (left) and screenshot from September 2016 (right) showing the removal of “improved social features”.**

### ***Mythic Dungeons***

In September 2016 (Patch 7.0.3), with the release of the *Legion* expansion, Blizzard introduced a new type of dungeon experience: Mythic and Mythic Plus. Players cannot queue for Mythic dungeons through the Group Finder interface, and instead, must seek out other players themselves to perform the more difficult content. This shift seems to encourage more collaboration between members of guilds and friends who play WoW together to accomplish difficult tasks. Mythic and Mythic Plus dungeons provide the most powerful gear available from 5-man dungeons, and are thus the most appealing for players to complete if they want to become stronger.

### ***Artifact Power***

Another change that Blizzard made that has, intentionally or unintentionally, addressed problems with Group Finder is the introduction of “Artifact Power.” Artifact Power can be used to increase the strength of a character’s weapon, and can be obtained by completing quests, killing rare enemies, winning PvP activities, or performing dungeons and raids. As many players complained on the forums, it is common practice for individuals to leave Group Finder groups after killing the specific enemy that they needed to kill or as a result of a group performing poorly (i.e., dying). Now, staying with a group will reward players with more Artifact Power, promising them some benefit to their character regardless of what gear or equipment they might obtain.

### ***Lingering Problems***

However, both of these solutions have their own problems. Both cater to the neoliberal ideology of the player as an entrepreneurial subject – continually working to improve their own performance or economic value without attention to the needs or desires of others around them;

both rely on the quantification of individual contribution and performance (e.g., through an interface, players can restrict what group members can be invited based on gear score); and both have been built on-top of more visible systems that still create the problematic social experiences such as those that players complained about above. Neither change completely addresses the mediation problems that Blizzard has introduced to WoW by the foundational design changes to the game.

While these changes to the game design may solve some of the issues that players reported, they also introduce new complications to social interactions between players. Changes that prioritize efficiency without consideration for social experience incentivize players to prioritize their own individualistic self interests and treat other people as tools to achieve those goals. Instead of players functioning as fully-realized, social, human agents, they become closer to non-player characters (NPCs) (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012) or artificial intelligent (AI) bots (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2015) – mechanically performing their prescribed roles to complete scripted tasks without communication in order to improve the efficacy of their machine (or avatar).

## Summary

When Blizzard released World of Warcraft in 2004, players needed to form social connections to prosper in the game. Players maintained relationships with others to play, and also, in many cases, because the friendships that they developed were important to them (Nardi & Harris, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2006).

Changes like Group Finder and cross-realm zones encouraged players to be self-reliant and perform activities by themselves. Solo play has always been part of the game (Nardi, 2010), but WoW's affordances now nudge players toward soloing, when the opposite was true in the past (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2015). Nardi (2012)

reflects on some of these changes and the implications these new mediations have had on the play experience: “Instead of fully realized human players engaging the game for social life as well as gaming challenge, players became functional mediators in the technological system to advance the narrowly-defined game goals of other players.” By reducing players to nameless faces in a crowd, players become disconnected from the other characters inhabiting the game world – viewing them only as a means to an end, rather than a fully realized person.

It might seem that a more efficient and individualistic game is what players want, and some do, but the significant drop in player subscriptions suggests that many players are not seeking an experience that is void of socializing. While there is a gap between when Blizzard introduced Group Finder and cross-realm zones and when players began complaining about the features, there will never be instantaneous understanding of the implications of a design change. For both examples, many small changes were made over the span of several years, which contributed to a shift in mediation of social experience.

Group Finder	Cross-Realm Zones
November 2004: Meeting Stones Added	August 2006: Cross-Realm Battlegrounds
January 2006: Looking For Group & Trade Chat Channels Merged	November 2010: Region-Wide Cross-Server Interactions (Dungeons, Battlegrounds, etc.)
December 2006: Looking For Group Interface Added; Looking For Group Chat Channel Removed	August 2012: Cross-Realm Zones
May 2007: Looking For Group Chat Channel Re-Added	November 2012: Cross-Realm Zone Hotfix
April 2009: Role Indicator Added to Looking For Group Interface	
December 2009: Looking For Group Interface Changed to Dungeon Finder Interface	
August 2012: Raid & Scenario Finder Added to Dungeon Finder; Challenge Mode Added to Dungeon Finder	
October 2014: Dungeon Finder Interface Changed to Group Finder Interface	

**Figure 5.5: A summary of changes made to Group Finder and cross-realm zones as of 2017.**

Players who do not like a change may leave the game immediately, while those who stay experience and discuss the negative effects of the changes. However, even players who may prefer “old school” methods of play are forced to adopt new mediations because they become the norm.

## **CHAPTER 6: Cultural Ideology Mediates Social Experience**

In this chapter, I explore how cultural ideologies mediate players' social experiences. By "mediation" I refer to the ways in which ideological values can manipulate, direct, and shape the relationships between a game and its players. I am concerned with how this relationship changes players' interactions with WoW and with one another. In particular, I examine how neoliberal ideological values informed players' motivations and guided their behaviors. The influences of ideological systems are difficult to discuss and analyze. However, I argue that they have important effects on people's experiences and need to be addressed in analyses of life online. Nostalrius players employed strategies in their play that reinforced the neoliberal ideology in an online game. In this chapter, I emphasize the effects of cultural ideologies on social experience, something that is often overlooked in favor of analyzing a technology's affordances. But affordances alone do not fully determine social experience in online games. I found that affordances interacted with the wider ideology of the culture in which players were immersed. As a result, players claimed they wanted a collaborative community, but often behaved in ways that were competitive and self-interested, thus creating a tension that diminished the overall play experience for many people.

I build on the work of scholars such as Braithwaite (2015) and Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2009), who have explored how neoliberal values inform game design and can affect how players engage with one another. I also draw from scholars such as Hardt and Negri (2001) and Harvey (2007) to situate neoliberalism as a general cultural phenomenon that permeates everyday life. I argue that the ways that WoW players behave have changed since the game's release in 2004, becoming increasingly influenced by a neoliberal ideology that values competition, commodification of players, and individualistic self-interest, rather than a



collaborative community. While the game's design is one way in which neoliberal values are enforced, the ideologies that players internalize from their daily lives are another. How has the neoliberal ideology changed players' WoW experience?

To answer this question, I move away from Blizzard's version of World of Warcraft to a different venue in which WoW is played, i.e., the Nostalrius Begins private server. Through private servers players have revived Vanilla WoW, an instantiation of WoW in which many believe that the people mattered as people, and social life was prized (Braithwaite, 2015; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015). One might assume that by returning to the "golden age" of WoW, often praised for the vigorous social atmosphere, it would be possible to recreate these memorable social experiences. I analyzed the life cycle and social structure of a guild on Nostalrius to understand the ways that the neoliberal ideology influenced players' motivations and directed their play in a way that more closely mirrored the current version of WoW, rather than the social haven that many players sought to revisit through Nostalrius.

### ***Examining Neoliberal Values in Player Behaviors***

In reflecting on Nostalrius Begins' release in March 2015, many of my interviewees remarked on the blossoming community on the server, the opportunities for interacting with other players, and the overwhelming nostalgia for a world that they believed they had lost.

Over time, however, players began to view collaborative activities as opportunities for competition. Neoliberal values permeated players' governance strategies and influenced how they made decisions and self-organized. The behaviors that I documented and the stories from players that I retell align with two of four problematic cultural effects of neoliberalism that Brown (2015) identified: *intensified inequality* and *unethical commercialization*.

Intensified inequality refers to the ever-increasing stratification of social classes. But social classes in WoW are only metaphorical – not based on individuals’ real world socioeconomic status, but instead on self-created power hierarchies, such as guilds. In the guilds that I played with, inequality was most obvious in the relationship between the guild leadership, a core of six to eight players who collectively decided on issues of governance for the guild and managed players during raid activities, and the raiders who performed group activities with the guild. There were some fluctuations in leadership over time as players left or the guild hierarchy was re-evaluated. I was a member of the leadership for several months as an officer. Two of the main and most influential leadership members were Wilez and Battleboar (pseudonyms), friends from retail WoW who created the guild together. Their expertise in the game and their roles as founders of the guild secured their positions as members of the leadership elite. These players were in central positions of power throughout my study period, and often enforced neoliberal ideological values on the members of the guild.

Several points of conflict emerged as tensions between the leadership and raiders grew. First, communication between the guild leadership and raiders deteriorated. The guild leadership often made decisions that conflicted with raiders’ desires, and failed to explain the rationale behind their choices. By communicating on a private chat channel that only the leadership could access, some raiders felt that the leadership was actively ignoring members of the guild. Second, the leadership often gave priority for raid spots to other members of the leadership elite – even when those members did not meet the same evaluative criteria to which raiders were held. Finally, even in situations where the leadership asked for raiders’ input for democratic solutions, final decisions frequently came from the leadership, regardless of what a majority of the raiders had said.

As Brown (2015) discusses, unethical commercialization refers to the exploitation and degradation of human workers by marketizing human behaviors. Again, this description is metaphorical. While players are not employed laborers, the self-imposed social strata in guilds allow certain players to dictate rules for evaluating player performance. Often, these evaluative measures were quantitative, and allowed players to rank one another based on their perceived economic worth to the guild. On Nostalrius, the guild leadership encouraged the use of RealmPlayers, a third-party application, to determine individual contributions via meters, or to track individual characters' quantitative damage and healing output during raids. While many people considered the information useful for evaluating their own performance, it often became the only evaluation that players considered. By emphasizing quantitative evaluation, the leadership inherently devalued non-quantifiable contributions – some of which were not included in RealmPlayers' algorithm (e.g., certain types of supportive spells without damage or healing output), and some of which were simply unquantifiable (e.g., players' time helping other guild members, pre-existing social relationships, individual demeanor, etc.). Reliance on these meters created visualizations of disparity between raiders, making scarce resources (e.g., raid spots and rare equipment) available only to players who performed to the standards set by the RealmPlayers algorithm. I explore the ways that this quantification of player performance encouraged selfish behaviors from the raiders and the guild leadership, including devaluing social capital (Coleman, 1988) in favor of quantitative metrics, encouraging less successful play practices, and developing animosity between raiders.

### Understanding Early Social Life on Nostalrius Begins

Scholars have demonstrated that many players associate Vanilla WoW with community and sociality (Braithwaite, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2015). The promise of social play with a

community of likeminded players was a main motivating force for many who ventured into Nostalrius Begins. Many players found entering Nostalrius Begins for the first time an exciting and nostalgic experience: *“I’m sure anyone who could read the name would tell, like the nostalgic feeling of something you loved that was taken away. And to have that back is just insane.”*

Some of this nostalgia came from re-experiencing old areas of the game, such as dungeons and questing areas. Nostalrius allowed players to revisit a version of Azeroth that no longer exists in retail WoW. After the *Cataclysm* expansion, many areas of the game were substantially changed. For example, Thousand Needles, a lower level questing area, was originally a dusty desert, inhabited by harpies and centaurs with a famous Gnomish racetrack at one end of the zone. However, after the Cataclysm expansion, Thousand Needles was flooded – removing many of the identifying features that players had come to associate with the region (see Figure 6.1).





**Figure 6.1: Thousand Needles as it was in Vanilla WoW (top) and as it is now after the *Cataclysm* expansion (bottom). Blizzard removed many of the notable features of the area by changing the zone. (Screenshot from AverynnAkane 2012)**

More frequently, however, players mentioned the social experience and community as something that contributed to the nostalgia of Nostalrius. O'Connor et al. (2015) note that “this sense of community was perceived [by players] as one of the best things about the game.” Indeed, players that I spoke to mentioned that the large community size was the deciding factor that drove them to Nostalrius over other private servers:

*“[One] thing I noticed too [was Nostalrius] had more people...that's ultimately what made me want to [play] on it. Just the people, the population... I had people messaging me while leveling up, asking me to do [things]. It was awesome. I loved it.”*

Many players alluded to situations where the other people in the world made the gaming experience better. One player reflected on his leveling experience on Nostalrius – something that was defined by spontaneous player interactions:

*“Leveling up from 1 to 60 takes a long time and a lot of the time, there's going to be someone else who's leveling from 1 to 60 at the same rate that you are on the other faction. And so a lot of the time you end up fighting the same guy in every zone you go to from 1 to 60 for the next like 2 weeks that you play the game, you're just fighting the same guy over quest mobs, over quest objectives, for no reason at all. Just killing them. So that's really, it's fun at times, and it's not fun at times obviously.”*

While previous research often highlights the sense of community that arose from the people within one's own faction or guild (Braithwaite, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2006), this player highlights the importance of enemy players for the community. “Fighting the same guy in every zone” created a memorable social experience – even in a situation where the players could not communicate with one another.

As others have found (Braithwaite, 2015; Cherny, 1999; O'Connor et al., 2015), chatting was another aspect of the social experience that players enjoyed. One player explained the role that chat channels had in her play experience:

*“I really like the banter in the general chat channels, even The Barrens [a notorious chat locale] ... it's something to keep you awake and make you laugh at the absurdity of it. I had really missed that as it phased out of retail WoW, so it was fun to see people actually talking to each other again ... [when retail] channels were empty. You were very much 'alone' unless you initiated everything.”*

In this player's estimation, even The Barrens' chat, a zone of lewd and crude discussions, contributed to the play experience. It kept her alert while questing in the game world, and contributed to a feeling that the people she played with were, in fact, people. This type of social experience, she argued, was absent from the current version of retail WoW – a finding consistently supported in the literature (Braithwaite, 2015; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2015). The social opportunities with friend and foe alike added to the play experience on Nostalrius in a meaningful way.

Players enjoyed repeatedly seeing the same people and developing relationships and reputations on the server. Indeed, repeated interactions with other players are something that other academics have noted as being crucial parts of the play experience in WoW (Braithwaite, 2015; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). One player described the Nostalrius community from his perspective, emphasizing the importance of familiarity between players for creating exciting social dynamics:

*“[On Nostalrius] you just know everybody and it's like, it's like a town, a small version of a city. It's really fun for that. Whether you are doing Battlegrounds and you always know the guy you're fighting, you always know at least one guy in your Battleground. You're familiar with people, you see them questing and ... you just, you encounter a lot of the same people. And it's really nice atmosphere. Always seeing the same people, it's fun.”*

The simple act of repeatedly seeing another person is not what made them memorable for this player. As he emphasizes, seeing these people continuously makes the game feel like “a small version of a city” with a sense of familiarity, competition, and camaraderie that develops when players are allowed to interact and develop persistent relationships within their small server

community. This comparison mirrors Braithwaite's (2015) interpretation that server communities are "akin to a small neighborhood" in which a player is embedded. The promise of social interactions was a key factor for compelling players to join, and stay, on Nostalrius.

### ***Creating a Sense of Community in Roasted Quail***

The players that I interviewed originally met in Roasted Quail, a small, tight-knit raiding guild founded in May 2015. Players found the guild appealing because their goal was to experience old raid content with a group of competent, friendly, and mature raiders. Guild members were frequently online looking for dungeon groups, trying to improve their gear for upcoming raids, and sometimes just enjoying talking with each other:

*"It's a place where ... you get a chance to interact with a bunch of people you wouldn't have otherwise interacted with ... It's just a place you can go to meet people and interact with people where you have like, a common goal. It just gives you an opportunity to, I don't know. Socialize."*

Roasted Quail, like guilds mentioned in prior studies, was a place where friendships and an overall community developed (Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015; Poor, 2015; Williams et al., 2006, 2006). A large portion of the activities Roasted Quail members participated in centered around raids or preparing for raids. But raids were not always fun and enjoyable experiences. Sometimes the guild faced particularly hard fights with new bosses that we had not killed yet. For these "progression" fights, tensions in the raids were sometimes palpable. But the members of Roasted Quail were not deterred by the struggle. One player recounted his first raid experience after joining Roasted Quail:

*"In Roasted Quail, I remember my first 40-man raid was Blackwing Lair. We went in and [died] probably 6 or 8 times or something like that. And I had a blast, to be honest. I remember*



*Battleboar was like yelling out instructions and everything and I was really amazed at like the level of organization and like sort of the attitude about it. He was saying that he knew that a lot of us didn't want to be there, but we need to get through it. This is like a progression guild<sup>8</sup> and it was just really neat to be a part of something like that. Like we all had the same goal and we all had like to work together and do the same. I don't know. So that was really neat.”*

Despite spending a large portion of the raid dying, the player still “had a blast.” While struggling to kill the boss was frustrating, the player claimed that the sense of fellowship that emerged from the guild working together to overcome a seemingly insurmountable challenge kept him motivated. Working together to achieve the same goal with a group of friends was a compelling force to keep the player engaged.

And overcoming those challenges for the first time was often a memorable experience for the guild. Progression was such a rewarding aspect of the play that some players specifically sought out Roasted Quail because they wanted to be able to celebrate those first time victories with a team of players:

*“I didn't want to join a guild that had everything [killed already]. I wanted to be a part of that progression. Because that was one of the things that I most fondly remembered, was getting the, the first kills, you know, lining up for the screenshots.”*

As the player above mentions, after a first successful kill, Roasted Quail would celebrate by taking a group photo in front of the boss with all members of the raid present (Figure 6.2). Some players had traditions that they tried to maintain across all of the first kill photos. For example, all the players with Hunter characters liked to stand together in the pictures as a show

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<sup>8</sup> By “progression guild,” this player refers to the fact that Roasted Quail had not yet cleared all the available content and was still defeating new bosses. By contrast, players referred to guilds that had defeated all available content in a dungeon as “farming guilds,” indicating that the guild could easily “farm,” or repeatedly defeat, the bosses for more equipment.

of solidarity. Other players liked to take off all of their character's armor or make them dance. While this might seem silly, boss kill photos were an important ritual that allowed the guild to commemorate its success and highlight the contributions of the players who attended the raid (Chen, 2012; Nardi, 2010; Paul & Philpott, 2009).



**Figure 6.2: Roasted Quail's first Chromaggus kill (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016).**

At this point, the emphasis of the guild was not on the progression itself, but on progressing *together* as a community of players. Members of Roasted Quail established a persistent community of friends and acquaintances (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2006). Together, this community made even frustrating raiding nights enjoyable according to some players. However, the community focus of the guild changed significantly in the following months, as the leadership worked to make play more efficient.

## Examining Neoliberal Values in Guild Governance

The leadership adopted several new strategies for guild governance in an attempt to reduce the time spent in raids and improve the performance of their raiders. Following the creation of Impetus, raids became performance sites for players to demonstrate their value to the guild. As its name implied, Impetus focused on high-speed, efficient runs, without as much concern for sociality within the guild. This shift in priorities did not go unnoticed by the former members of Roasted Quail:

*“[The leadership] felt that the guild was underperforming for the amount of gear and progression that we were accomplishing, so they decided to expand the roster, make raid slots more competitive so that people would try harder ... They wanted people to not feel safe and secure.”*

This player’s statement about the leadership’s desire to make players “not feel safe and secure” illustrates Brown’s (2015) argument that “rendering human beings as capital ... [removes any] guarantee of security, protection, or even survival.” Many players were uneasy about the merger, and what that meant for their roles in the guild. Rather than quelling players’ fears, the new leadership maintained a level of aloofness from the raiders creating more animosity and confusion:

*“There wasn't any like, communication from the raid leaders, from my perspective anyway, as far as like, what was to be expected for [raid] invites and they just wanted everybody to log on and have a hundred people on an island so they could choose 40 of them, you know? And so, so that happened and we ended up with ... [them] picking and choosing and segmenting and whatever.”*

The process of “picking and choosing and segmenting” led players to view each other as competitors rather than teammates. The transition from *exchanging* with one another to *competing* with one another changed the ethos of the guild dramatically. Brown (2015) and Harvey (2007) note that such a change in behaviors is a core tenant of the shift from a democratic to a neoliberal society. While Roasted Quail had a raid roster that could barely fill a 40-man group, Impetus had between 70-80 potential raiders, creating severe competition for spots. Helping a fellow raider became a risky decision that could jeopardize a player’s chance for a raid invitation by improving another player’s performance.

Competition became a “primary virtue” in Impetus, as it is in neoliberal societies (Harvey, 2007). But some scholars argue that competition is not a natural or default state of existence (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1979; Harvey, 2007). Foucault (1979) states: “Competition is not the result of natural interplay of appetites, instincts, behavior ... It is, as it were, a formal game between inequalities; it is not a natural game between individuals and behaviors.” However, the game leadership created an environment where competition was, as Harvey (2007) said of neoliberalism, “common sense,” or “a necessary, even wholly ‘natural’, way for the social order to be regulated.” The new leadership’s governance strategies included creating an immense competition for available resources, measuring player value via quantified metrics, furthering the divide between raiders and the leadership elite, and treating raiders as capital that increased the value of the guild, rather than treating all guild members as fully realized social agents. As the guild’s ideological values aligned more closely to neoliberalism, a number of negative repercussions ensued for the raiders.

### ***Realm Players: The Tool of Neoliberal Play***

The leadership found algorithmic solutions to track players' performance, which contributed to the adoption of neoliberal values within the guild. While the game design itself did not allow players to track their performance beyond the successful defeating of a boss, mods like RealmPlayers measured and quantified players' individual contributions. In some cases, the metrics that these mods provided became a focal point for players. Tensions within Impetus rose as more situations placed the efficiency-oriented goals of the leadership against the socially-oriented goals of many of the raiders. An increased reliance on RealmPlayers reflected this tension.

RealmPlayers became an essential tool that the leadership used for the economization of play in Impetus. By "economization," I refer to the process of transforming the practices, knowledge, and conduct of a previously non-economic activity into those that mimic economic or market-driven values (Brown, 2015; Çalışkan & Callon, 2009, 2010; Callon & Caliskan, 2008). It is important to note that the economization of play does not necessarily involve the *monetization* of play, though it can (see Debeauvais, Nardi, Lopes, Yee, & Ducheneaut, 2012; Dibbell, 2007a, 2007b; Dyer-Witford & de Peuter, 2009; Nardi & Kow, 2010 for more discussions of monetized play). Rather, the process of economization encourages individuals to view practices "in terms of [their] contribution to economic growth or American competitiveness" (Brown, 2015).

In the opening chapter of her book, Brown (2015) asked: "What happens when ... the commitment to individual and collective self-rule and the institutions supporting it are overwhelmed and then displaced by the encomium to enhance capital value, competitive position, and credit ratings?" Impetus' adoption of RealmPlayers quickly became a case study of

the power of neoliberal values in the economization of a previously non-economized activity. While not designed to intentionally encourage the economization of play, continued use of RealmPlayers caused many raiders to view their play according to economically-driven metrics. RealmPlayers provided information about player performance in a way that was public, archived, and organized via leader board. While other mods are capable of quantitatively tracking players' damage and healing, the level of detail that RealmPlayers offered was near impossible to obtain in early versions of WoW. It measured players' performance in a number of ways that allowed players to evaluate their own performance over time, and afforded the leadership the ability to determine which players were doing the most damage and healing. These measurements quickly became synonymous with "value to the guild."

Brown (2015) argues that when the neoliberal ideology encourages ubiquitous economization, there are three outcomes. First, people view themselves as *homo oeconomicus*: "an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its...portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues" (Brown, 2015). Many players became obsessed with the RealmPlayers meters. Inevitably, following a raid, at least one player would ask in voice chat: "Are the meters up yet?" Raiders and leadership alike scrutinized the meters following raids to determine who had performed the "best" according to the RealmPlayers algorithm.

The second outcome of neoliberal economization that Brown (2015) identifies is *homo oeconomicus*' emphasis on "strengthen[ing] its competitive positioning and appreciate[ing] its value." The leadership of Roasted Quail strengthened their position by merging with another raiding guild to create Impetus. Increasing the roster of potential raiders allowed the leadership to prioritize who had access to raid based on the performance of a larger number of players.

While the leadership only chose to take those ranked highly on the RealmPlayers meters, the larger numbers of players in the guild allowed them to optimize raid groups by taking the highest performing members from a larger pool of raiders.

Finally, Brown (2015) argues that economization of social agents results in *homo oeconomicus* working to improve its value in all spheres of daily life, such as “rankings and ratings for every activity and domain.” Indeed, on Nostalrius, members of the newly formed Impetus were aware of not only their rankings, but also the rankings of their peers according to the RealmPlayers leader board. A higher rank was associated with a higher probability of being invited to raids, thus incentivizing players to track and evaluate their economic value according to the RealmPlayers algorithm.

### ***Negative Outcomes of RealmPlayers***

Sometimes players’ fixation on the RealmPlayers meters negatively affected the guild. One player explained how deeply the value of the RealmPlayers meters had permeated raiders’ attitudes about the game: “[*RealmPlayers*] causes people to be more selfish, and not do things that help the raid, but instead things that help their own meters. So that's what happens when we reward that behavior, you get more of it.” The “selfishness” this player mentions refers to negative behaviors that began to emerge in raids: players ignoring direction from the leadership, refusing to use certain abilities, and optimizing their play in a way that benefitted their rank on the meters, rather than the performance of the guild.

As with any algorithm, the RealmPlayers algorithm was flawed. It was unable to track all actions that a player performed, and thus did not give a comprehensive picture of a player’s performance in a raid. While the leadership continued to rely on RealmPlayers to curate a team of the strongest raiders, players began to analyze what the system was measuring to understand

how to exploit the system to improve their own individual rankings. However, increasing the performance of an *individual player* according to what RealmPlayers measured was not necessarily what would improve the *raid group's* success. RealmPlayers was not robust enough to record every single action a player took. In fact, many abilities were ignored in RealmPlayers' algorithm. Raids are designed so that certain supportive abilities must be deployed in order to remove negative status effects from other characters. However, the algorithm did not track these spells. The omissions were distressing to affected players. For example, one player said:

*“What I wish happened was meters showing like dispels, cleanses, them showing spell interrupts, you know stuff like that. It doesn't, so all you get is people who just spam their highest [damage] stuff and get on the meters.”*

As this player notes, RealmPlayers did not record abilities that do not do any quantifiable damage, such as “dispels” and “cleanses,” spells that remove negative effects from other characters. While some mods were able to track non-quantifiable spells in Vanilla WoW, the technology in these mods did not work on Nostalrius Begins, leaving a gap in the information collected. The RealmPlayers algorithm did not track non-quantifiable spells, nor include them in players' ranks on the RealmPlayers leader board. Thus, players deemed the skills worthless, even though a number of raid bosses required that some players use these spells. Many players began avoiding using non-quantifiable supportive abilities in favor of maximizing their damage or healing output. The leadership's solution was to assign specific players to “dispel duty” for fights because players no longer willingly used the spells unless they were directly ordered.

The limitations of the RealmPlayers algorithm directly affected the ways that players engaged with the game. Abilities that were once used without hesitation to help the raid were now ignored because players were not rewarded for using them. Harvey (2007) explains that in



neoliberal regimes the phenomenon of technological and algorithmic solutions changing individuals' behaviors: "Technological innovations [can be used] to undermine dominant social relations and institutions; they can ... even reshape common sense to their own pecuniary advantage." Impetus raiders worked to optimize their individual performance on the RealmPlayers meters, even if it meant sacrificing the guild's performance overall. While this might seem counterintuitive and in some cases self-destructive for the guild to behave in such a way, the neoliberal ethos had permeated the guild culture and the leadership's governance. One player reflected on his experience watching RealmPlayers dominate raid choices:

*"It ... ignores too much else, like it creates bad incentives. Like, there's times when we say '[damage] stop. Stop [damage].' But then people keep [doing damage]. And there's a reason for that. Because they get rewarded for it ... [but] people have other responsibilities, like for example, [another player said:] 'Oh I don't want [that role] because I want to be able to just sit there and do damage so I can be higher on the meters.'"*

In some situations, all members of the raid need to stop attacking a boss to prevent particular negative outcomes, such as special attacks, that could kill the raid group. Because of players' preoccupation with the RealmPlayers meters, however, some individuals felt that they could sneak in a few extra attacks to improve their ranking without the leadership noticing. These players sometimes accidentally led to the death of all 39 other players in the raid in order to improve their damage for the fight! The system encouraged players to be devious, sometimes even ignoring the commands of the leadership, to benefit themselves at the expense of others. While the leadership's goal was reducing the time spent in raids by increasing the efficiency of their raiders, accidental deaths as a result of players' attempts to cheat the RealmPlayers meters added additional strain to the raid and to the social dynamics of the guild.

### ***Intensified Inequality in Impetus***

An intensified inequality between the leadership and the raiders emerged out of Impetus' increased focus on competition and quantitative performance. The guild no longer relied on democratic decision-making. Instead, the leadership had full decision-making power, regardless of the desires of the raiders. Democratic institutions are particularly susceptible to neoliberal influence. Brown (2015) explains: "The term 'democracy' contains nothing beyond the principle that the demos rules ... it affords [collective input] without guaranteeing the possibility that power will be wielded on behalf of the many, rather than the few, that all might be regarded as ends, rather than means, and that all may have a political voice." Indeed, many incidents arose that resulted in the majority of raiders being ignored in favor of the wishes of the leadership elite.

The inequalities between guild social strata emerged in a number of ways, such as loot distribution. For example, a rare belt for Hunters dropped from Vaelastrasz, the second raid boss in Blackwing Lair (see Figure 6.3). It was the first time the guild had seen the belt, and it was a dramatic improvement for all of the Hunters. Collectively, the Hunters decided to abstain from asking for the belt in order to give it to Maurgani, a long-time Hunter in the guild.



**Figure 6.3: The raid standing in front of Vaelastrasz during loot distribution. (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2015)**

The decision was an act of solidarity, as Maurgani had been having a particularly hard time performing to the new standards enforced by the leadership, even losing his rank as a member of the leadership because of his failure to perform. By offering him the belt and declining to ask for it themselves, the other Hunters were trying to demonstrate that they valued Maurgani as a member of the community. Obtaining the belt would help his performance based on the metrics that the leadership valued, i.e., damage output.

However, the leadership, who controlled the distribution of the equipment, opted to give the belt to Flexure, a Hunter who was regularly at the top of the RealmPlayers meters. As soon as the leadership gave Flexure the item, it was bound to his character, and untradeable to anyone else. In a neoliberal society “market competition becomes generalized as a social and political principle, some will triumph and some will die...as a matter of social and political principle”

(Brown, 2015). In this case, the leadership ignored the desires of the raiders to support struggling members, instead choosing to reward those who were already succeeding.

By rewarding high performing players and ignoring low performing players, the leadership opted to use governance strategies that “displace[d] liberal democratic-justice concerns” and conflate[d] “questions of right with questions of efficiency” (Brown, 2015). Rather than supporting the raid so that all members were capable of succeeding, the leadership created a monopoly where the best players received more equipment, creating a further divide between the high-skilled and low-skilled raiders.

Complicating matters further was the leadership’s discussion taking place in “Officer Chat,” a private chat channel to which only the guild leadership had access. The leadership excluded the average raiders from the discussion, and often left raiders confused by the resulting decisions. Many raiders felt that there was a lack of transparency from the leadership regarding decision-making. One player explained:

*“I’m seeing a lot of distrust going on between the like the average raiders and the [leadership] council. Like I feel like they could be doing more to sort of dispel that distrust. They could open up like what they’re planning to the players and to guild members.”*

When social agents are encouraged to compete, “equality ceases to be our presumed natural relation with one another” (Brown, 2015). Instead, we understand our relationships to those around us in terms of a hierarchical ranking structure. Players already viewed the relationship between “the average raiders” and “the leadership council” as unequal. Members of Impetus viewed each other as competitors – but the leadership functioned as a different social strata with additional resources, rights, and access that were not afforded to the average raider.

Following the resulting backlash from this event, the leadership established new rules for loot distribution known as “loot council,” a system that determines who receives a piece of equipment based on a private vote from the leadership. Although it seems more democratic to have a group to make decisions, the council was solely composed of leadership members, thus further privatizing the process of loot distribution. Rather than giving some democratic voting privileges to some raid members, the leadership kept sole power in the decision-making process. Now, the highest performers would be rewarded with additional value, i.e., new equipment, while those who “constitute[d] a drag on this good, rather than a contribution to it,” were abandoned or replaced (Brown, 2015).

In addition to rewarding highly performing players with additional equipment, the leadership used RealmPlayers to determine whether or not players received raid invitations. Raid invitations quickly became a source of strife for raiders, and contributed to the intensified inequality between the raiders and the leadership. Since a raid only allows a maximum of 40 players in at a time, spots are limited. In some cases, raid inviting based on RealmPlayers numbers created tough situations for players.

For example, Filly and Auxmel were a married couple in Roasted Quail and Impetus. They played on Nostalrius to have a social activity to do together. When the leadership began relying on RealmPlayers to determine whether or not raiders received an invitation, Filly was quickly relegated to the “bench,” a metaphorical term used to refer to players who were on standby in case someone in the raid needed to leave. Because her equipment was not as powerful as other characters in her role, she could not keep her healing numbers competitive with the other raiders. Rather than inviting Filly so that she and her husband could play together and attempting to compensate for her lower performance in other ways, the guild leadership simply excluded her

from raid activities. This created a difficult situation for Filly: she was no longer invited to raids because her numbers on the meters were too low, but she was no longer in raids to obtain equipment that might increase her numbers or demonstrate that she was improving on the meters. This situation presented what Harvey (2007) describes as “a contradiction ... between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other”. However, the Impetus leadership chose to ignore pre-existing social relationships between raiders, instead prioritizing efficiency and individual performance.

In some cases, the leadership ignored their own rules in order to benefit other members of the leadership elite. Wilez, the Rogue Class Leader and longtime friend of the guild leader, Battleboar, was regularly performing “worse” than other members of his class according to the RealmPlayers meters. Rogues are a very popular class in World of Warcraft, and it was no different on Nostalrius. Impetus regularly had Rogues on standby because there were simply not enough raid spots to take them all. Based on the logic that the leadership had established, if Wilez was not performing to the expected standard of his class, he would no longer be invited to raids. However, because of his position of elite power and privilege, the leadership gave him priority over other Rogues, some of whom frequently performed better than he did. Through the lens of neoliberalism, Brown (2015) explains this phenomenon: “When neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable.” The neoliberal ideology that the guild leadership had been enforcing dictated that poorly performing players would be removed or replaced. In this case, the leadership needed to find a new justification for continuing to allow this member access to raids. Thus, they used Wilez’s position as a member of the elite to warrant his

continued invitation to the group – something most players did not question. However, this fact did not go unnoticed by the disenfranchised Rogues who were left out of raids in favor of inviting a player simply because he was a member of the leadership.

Intensified inequality allowed the leadership elite to secure their positions of power and reward players that met their performance standards. Raiders, on the other hand, were forced into positions of needing to continually prove their worth to the guild or risk being abandoned or replaced by another player. As Harvey (2007) asserts: “Class is not a stable social configuration.” Indeed, in World of Warcraft, this statement is even more applicable as guild ranks are not determined by socioeconomic status or other demographic elements, but instead by social agreement between players. Rank is a tenebrous construct. In Impetus, rank became the justification for why “some will be rescued and resuscitated, while others will be cast off or left to perish” (Brown, 2015). In some cases, rank was levied as a reason for punishing a player (i.e., Maurgani’s raid performance), and in others used to justify ideologically dissonant behaviors (i.e., Wilez’s raid performance).

### ***Unethical Commercialization in Impetus***

The Impetus leadership used a number of governance strategies that commercialized and commodified the raiders, treating them as capital for the leadership to exploit. Some players speculated that the leadership’s incentives for the initial merger were selfishly motivated: “[*The leadership*] decided to merge because they wanted take a bit more of an elitist approach to the game.” To meet the expectations of the new “elitist approach” the leadership enforced, players began working harder to ensure that they were performing well in raids. High performance was now associated with a secure raid spot, while poor performance meant a player was not deserving of an invitation. Brown (2015) notes that neoliberalism operates by “limit[ing] or

stratify[ing] access to what ought to be broadly accessible and shared,” the Impetus leadership contributed to the exploitation and degradation of the raiders. The leadership in Impetus implied that it was possible for anyone to get a spot in a raid if they were willing to try hard enough and perform to the leadership’s expectations. This type of competition for resources (i.e., raid spots) allowed “stronger [agents to] drive out weaker,” something that the leadership considered “unproblematic (it should, they say, maximize efficiency) provided there are no substantial barriers to the entry of competitors” (Harvey, 2007). For some players, optimizing play in the way the leadership expected was simply not possible. Rather than receiving help or support from the leadership, however, players whose performance slipped were perceived as not trying hard enough (Brown, 2015; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Harvey, 2007).

As Harvey (2007) notes, with irony, in neoliberal societies “there is a technological fix for each and every problem.” Some players were desperate to increase their numbers so that they could still attend raids, even if that meant automating play. During my ethnography, one player revealed in secret that he had been using a mod that automated healing spells. “Quick Heal” was designed to reduce the cognitive load of healing for certain types of characters. Rather than a human determining which spell would be most effective at a given time, the mod would automatically calculate the most efficient spell for a given character to use at the click of a button. Though the player admitted that the mod removed the fun of playing his character, he felt that it was the only way to push his performance to acceptable levels. He also needed to keep his usage of the mod hidden from other players to prevent them from gaining an advantage over him, ensuring his position in future raids. As in a neoliberal regime, the leadership expected the average raider to “at once [be] in charge of itself, responsible for itself, and yet a potentially dispensable element of the whole” (Brown, 2015). In an attempt to mitigate the feeling of



disposableness that many players felt, some were even willing to go as far as letting an algorithm play their game for them.

Treating players as a dispensable resource created another set of problems for players who did not meet the leadership's standards. After the merger, the leadership eventually solidified a new core of raiders based on the RealmPlayers metrics. Some players who did not make the cut stopped logging on for raids entirely, often because they knew they would not be invited to the group. However, the leadership did not view the dissolving raid roster as a problem. From their perspective, weaker players leaving only strengthened the guild. As in neoliberal societies, "personal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed" (Harvey, 2007). Players who were continually overlooked did not see any way to improve in the system that the guild leadership had created. Some saw leaving the system entirely as the only solution.

Players who stayed faced a new imposition that commodified their value to the guild. On the RealmPlayers site, there is a ranking of the top performing guilds by server. In an effort to improve Impetus' ranking on the RealmPlayers leader board, the leadership removed alternate or "alt" characters (secondary characters to supplement a player's "main" character) and social characters (members who did not actively raid and/or just had friends in the guild) from the guild roster in an attempt to increase the guild's ranking. The thought was that these characters that did not raid would be ranked lower individually, thus, removing them might increase the guild's ranking overall. One player explained:

*"RealmPlayers ranks the guilds by boss kills. They were seeing if fewer [non-raiders at the level cap of 60], and thus a higher percentage of guild [members] listed on boss kills, made a*

*difference in the guilds rankings. Spoiler: it doesn't really make a huge difference, but that experience was extremely annoying.”*

This experiment “configure[d] human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (Brown, 2015). As this player mentioned, this experiment was solely to improve the guild’s ranking. However, guilds in WoW are designed to be social systems that provide access to additional chat channels and information about others within the same community. Now, players viewed the guild in terms of its market value – in this case, its rank on RealmPlayers.

The economization of the guild structure created problems for social interactions between guild members. All alts were removed from the guild for this experiment, which meant that many players who were leveling other characters had no access to guild chat. Again, the guild’s emphasis on rank and performance came at the sacrifice of sociality between guild members. One player noted:

*“If [my] alt isn't in guild, I can't keep an eye on g[uild] chat for a group, or just banter with them while leveling... [for example] let me switch to [my main character] and help you XYZ, whether it's helping one person do something, or joining a group for a dungeon.”*

For this player, group activities became harder to coordinate and communication with other players was hampered. While she was on her alt, she was unable to see what other members were doing or talk with them via chat because certain characters had been removed from the guild.

The leadership’s commodification of their guild members led to players feeling disposable and undervalued within their community. In situations where players were valued, it was for their potential contribution to the economization of the guild via RealmPlayers’ ranking.

As Brown (2015) summarizes the shift from humanity to human capital: “Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity ... by its form of valuation.” After Impetus was established, the guild behaved less like a social community and more like an economic market. The leadership created an environment where individual agents were competing with one another for scarce resources (i.e., raid spots), thus allowing the highest performers to monopolize the available resources, and letting those who could not meet the established expectations struggle until they left or were forcibly removed.

### ***Reducing Sense of Community through Economization of Play***

While Eklund and Johansson (2013), Braithwaite (2015), and O’Connor et al. (2015) identify aspects of game design that contributed to the decline of community and sociality in WoW, for Impetus, *this decline was instigated by the players themselves*. The leadership’s ability to instill neoliberal values in the raiders, reward players based on quantitative performance metrics, and privatize decision-making processes caused a rift in the community within the guild between those that wanted to play together and those that wanted to play to be the best as exclusive, elite individuals.

Brown (2015) asks: “What holds families or societies together in neoliberal regimes?” Some suggestions she offers include love, loyalty, and community (Brown, 2015). Indeed, the former members of Roasted Quail spoke to these facets of early life in the guild as contributing to their continued stay in Impetus. However, the neoliberal values enforced by the leadership coupled with new, unfamiliar members after the merger, had changed the guild ethos significantly:

*“It's not the same atmosphere...as Roasted Quail, where like ‘Oh we're raiding with,’ like I was going to say ‘family’ right? It wasn't really a family, but people got along pretty nicely,*

*and I can't tell you one person that I disliked in Roasted Quail. I just can't. I think I pretty much liked everyone. In Impetus it's like, they try to pick the best from each and every little sub-group, so the atmosphere is competition, it's not that it's a negative effect...but it's not the same friendly atmosphere.”*

The leadership had created a neoliberal environment as Harvey (2007) describes, where their “incredible ability ... to exercise a controlling power,” over the guild to direct its desires, motives, and wealth distribution flourished. Changing the guild from, as this player described, “a family” to a site where players competed with one another for resources contributed to a decline of community in the guild overall. Many of the players I talked to were disheartened by the state of Impetus, but they were unsure of what to do to make the game enjoyable again. Some players felt disenfranchised by the leadership, isolated from their peers, and devalued as persons during raids. One player summarized what many players felt about the merger:

*“Man I could just name so many people ... I don't know I could just name like basically our entire 40 man from back [in Roasted Quail] ... like I liked basically everyone back then, so. That was, that was before the merger. After the merger, the elite elitists showed up and you know, it's not as close-knit anymore ... you don't get the same vibe that you did before. Like I don't know, I look back on those days, I see sunshine and I see [raids] and I see no loot dropping and now I see no loot dropping and no sunshine. No loot ever drops, but at least there was sunshine.”*

It was clear that at one time, the guild had been a source of joy or “sunshine” for players; primarily because of the community. As this player jokes, receiving good equipment from raids was never consistent enough to be a regular source of enjoyment, but the “close-knit” relationships between members of the guild were.

The neoliberal ideology that the guild leadership enforced permeated the guild culture “to the point where it [had] become incorporated into the common-sense way that [we] interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007). Eventually, some players began to leave. Players’ reasons for leaving varied, but a portion of players left because of the change in the guild’s ethos:

*“Well, there's been a bit of, like, sort of a pessimistic mood about how the guild has been going. And like, they recently made it so that alts couldn't join the guild, and they're like trying to boost their RealmPlayers status and everything...I feel like they're realizing that they're losing players. That their core is sort of weakening and everything.”*

In an attempt to strengthen the guild’s position on Nostalrius by improving their RealmPlayers rank, continually rewarding their highest performing players, and privately making decisions that often undermined the democratic majority, the leadership had alienated their community of players. The appearance of aloofness of the leadership resulting from their efforts to establish themselves as an upper echelon of elites made many players anxious about confronting them about their dissatisfaction with the guild. Often during raids, players would chat with me privately about the lack of transparency from the guild leadership and lack of leadership responses to concerns from raiders. One player explained why he stopped playing on Nostalrius shortly after Roasted Quail’s merger into Impetus:

*“[In Roasted Quail] I felt like I was considered a core member of the team, you know? And so that's like a good feeling because you're needed, like I always helped out with raids, like I was making cloaks for the guild, I was building repair bots and spending my money on it, you know, all that kind of shit. And so I felt like I was like part of the team and that was the reason I was willing to do that kind of stuff.”*

Even though this player's actions could be seen as working towards the economization of play by providing items and spending money for the sake of the guild, his motivation stemmed from his place within a community. Rather than performing these tasks to improve his own standing or better himself, he chose to perform actions that benefitted other players, exchanging his time and resource for the benefit of the community. The sense of belonging to a "team" or community encouraged players to act against the neoliberal ideology that eventually took hold, promoting an environment where people are valued as people, and players acted with the betterment of the community in mind.

Harvey (2007) identifies a condition in the neoliberal society in which "the temporary contract" replaces "permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, [and] family ... domains." As soon as other, better performing members of the guild outranked this player, the leadership stopped extending raid invites to him. Even though he was willing to spend his own money on resources that benefitted the guild, he no longer felt "like part of the team." After repeatedly being snubbed by the leadership, and unable to gather any information about what he could do to improve his chances of getting an invite, he decided to abandon the game all together. This player went on later in his interview to make a distinction between "old school" and "new school" WoW:

*"And so the old school WoW mentality says like, that there's like loyalty there, there's like everything: you're finishing the [dungeons], you're killing the bosses, that's what's important and you're doing it with a group of people who...give a shit about you...Even if it takes longer, whatever. And the new school WoW mentality is that this person does 10 [damage] more than you per second on this boss fight, and net/net there's no difference, like net/net we're still killing the boss, it just will take like, you know 3 minutes less time or whatever, if everybody in our raid*

*does 10 [damage] more...[but being good is] not like, metrics driven, like what you're doing is not driven by like metrics or healing meters. It's driven by like success in the raid, you know?"*

This description of Impetus' reliance on meters echoes Brown's (2015) description of neoliberalism "as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life." As the player pointed out, Impetus' new atmosphere was similar to what he referred to as "new school WoW," or the World of Warcraft that values individualistic play (Braithwaite, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2015). The shift from valuing "loyalty" to valuing efficiency and quantifiable metrics left many players feeling that they had been abandoned by their guild, and indeed, they frequently had. At the time I ended ethnographic data collection, roughly half of Roasted Quail's original raid roster had left Impetus or left Nostalrius entirely.

Because RealmPlayers was not required to play on Nostalrius, some members of Impetus suggested ignoring it, or not using it in raids. One player in a leadership role said: "*Some officers actually floated that idea of not recording [RealmPlayers information], but then they said 'Well, people are going to record anyway.'*" RealmPlayers had become part of what Harvey (2007) identifies as common sense. "It is not the same as the 'good sense' that can be constructed out of critical engagement with issues of the day," but instead becomes the norm for people's understanding of the world as it is "constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization" (Harvey, 2007). RealmPlayers had become the norm. Players who regularly ranked highly on RealmPlayers were incentivized to continue using the system because it ensured that they would maintain their raid spot in the future, even to the detriment of other players in the guild who would not have a chance to raid. Despite what the leadership may have

asked, if even one player in the 40-man raid decided to use RealmPlayers, quantified information about individual performance in the raid would be available.

But why did these players stay? Impetus was one of many raiding guilds on Nostalrius, and certainly not the only option for players. However, the coercive powers of the neoliberal ideology “can produce a fatalistic, even abject acceptance of the idea that there was and is, ‘no alternative’” (Harvey, 2007). Indeed, Brown (2015) also states that “the loss of conviction about the human capacity to craft and steer its existence” to other forms of governance contributes to the profoundly devastating effects of the neoliberal ideology. While many of the players I spoke to felt that the “fun” had been drained from raiding, they could not imagine any alternative scenarios, as this environment had become their reality. Many players believed that other guilds would have the same problems that Impetus faced, but at least in Impetus there was some semblance of a community left.

## Summary

In this chapter, I explained the ways that neoliberal values emerged through the interaction between technologies and the people who use them. I analyzed Impetus, a raiding guild on the Nostalrius Begins server, and its predecessor Roasted Quail. The leadership of Impetus encouraged the use of RealmPlayers, a software modification that allowed players to track their performance, but reliance on the system to determine player value contributed to an intensified inequality between raiders and the leadership and the commodification of raiders.

The problems in Impetus mirrored some of the problems that Nardi (2010) documented in her guild Scarlet Raven – namely, the use of raid spots as precious resources to be allocated to the highest performing players. However, for Nardi’s (2010) players, the increased value of raid spots was imposed by a game design change: the introduction of 10-man raiding in *The Burning*



*Crusade* expansion. Nardi (2010) explains the change in Scarlet Raven's social dynamics by noting that "the design of a software artifact ... may powerfully shape human activity." Indeed, Nardi's findings regarding the effects of software design on player behavior were reiterated in later literature (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2015).

But software design alone is not the only contributing factor to player behavior in online games. *Impetus* provides an important point of contrast here because, at the time, there were no game design changes that dictated that players refigure their raiding composition. 40-man raids were the norm for both of the two main raids available in the game at the time. Instead, the leadership created tension themselves by expanding the guild roster to a point where not every guild member would be invited to raids.

While the players in Scarlet Raven let the intensified inequality between the high-performing raiders and low-performing raiders dominate the guild ethos, *Impetus* members showed some attempts at resistance, but with minimal success. Once the leadership began enforcing new governance strategies that encouraged players to view each other as competitors, players were not sure how to foster the family-like environment that they previously enjoyed in the guild. While "the contradiction between raid progression and group support" led the high-performing players of Scarlet Raven to seek other opportunities (Nardi, 2010), for *Impetus* this contradiction pushed away weaker-performing players who were no longer allowed to play with their community, a situation lamented by some of the active raiders who missed playing with their friends.

While *Nostalrius Begins* originally intended to bring back a nostalgic, Vanilla WoW experience, players in *Impetus* were influenced by the neoliberal values reflected in the leadership's governance strategies. Players began to view each other as competitors rather than

collaborators, and learned to value each other based on quantitative performance metrics. The tension between community and competition that emerged in Impetus more closely matched current versions of retail World of Warcraft, rather than the game version that many players were trying to re-experience by playing on Nostalrius.

## CHAPTER 7: Discussion

My research indicates that while games are products of the cultures that they emerge from, so are the players. Prior literature addresses the effects of game design on player behavior and social experience (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015; Simon et al., 2009). While game design is clearly important, we also need to consider cultural and ideological influences on player behavior. In this chapter, I address how Blizzard embedded sociality into Vanilla WoW's game design, why today's players favor efficiency over sociality, and how sociality might be revived in contemporary WoW. These issues are complex, but it is important to start discussing them now. Despite the countless hours people spend in online games (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2005; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; T. L. Taylor, 1999; Turkle, 1995), we do not yet fully understand their social and cultural significance. I argue that while discussing the significance of games in contemporary culture is difficult, it is still an important topic that needs to be addressed.

### Vanilla WoW's Sociality was not an Accident

In conversations that I have had with Blizzard employees, many describe the social phenomenon of Vanilla WoW as a "happy accident" that developed "organically" within the game. However, I argue that Vanilla WoW's sociality was not an accident. Instead, Blizzard structured sociality into the game's initial design. For example, emotes offer ways for "players [to] come together to flirt, dance, drink, hug, joke, smile, laugh, and cheer" (Nardi & Harris, 2006) through a series of commands that are accompanied by some dialogue and non-verbal actions. Emotes serve no function in the game to help a character progress. Players cannot use emotes to gain experience or complete quests; emotes serve a purely social function, but other social features, such as guilds, provide more practical functions that helped a player progress

through the game by embedding them within a community. Nardi (2010) documents many situations where emotes were used to liven up conversations, add a sense of joviality to an activity, or simply create a fun atmosphere (see Figure 7.1). It is clear that Blizzard thought that these functions were important, because they included them in the game, and emotes still exist today. World of Warcraft is not just about leveling (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005) or getting the most valuable equipment (Bardzell et al., 2008; Braithwaite, 2015). Interacting with other players and participating in “random acts of fun” is another key element of the game’s appeal (Nardi & Harris, 2006).



**Figure 7.1: A group of players using the “dance” emote at an in-game bar (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2006).**

Much of WoW’s design fostered a sense of community between players that was often lauded as “one of the best things about the game” (O’Connor et al., 2015). These social affordances foster social bonds, and encourage players to develop ties of friendship which form the basis for collaborative play and increase the longevity of the game itself (Farzan et al., 2011,

2011; Tausczik et al., 2014). I address examples of socio-technical affordances that contributed to the inherent sociality of early WoW by examining the design of communal spaces and player interdependencies.

### *Creating Communal Spaces*

Blizzard designed World of Warcraft to include communal spaces that contributed to the inherent sociality of the game. In communal spaces, players bumped into others, sometimes literally, because there were a large number of characters concentrated in a small space.

Servers often functioned as their own self-contained communities (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; Nardi, 2010) or “third places” (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2005; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) that nurtured healthy social networks of players. In 2006, it was estimated that each server hosted a maximum of roughly 20,000 players (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Though servers were all alike in their geography, the communities differed, allowing servers to develop their own reputations and social networks. Players embedded themselves within a lively community to find opportunities for group activities. The robustness of these communities is evident in Moonfall’s activities discussed in Chapter 5. Moonfall players maintained a community, even after many of them had left the game or played on a different server. With a limited number of players on each server, people could develop persistent identities (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2014a), guilds could establish reputations for their accomplishments (Nardi, 2010; Paul & Philpott, 2009), and players’ actions could affect their standing within the community (Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; Nardi, 2010; Paul & Philpott, 2009). Success in later parts of the game depended on how well a player integrated into the server’s social network.

Now, however, server community is all but lost. With players from multiple servers able to interact in 5-man dungeons, battlegrounds, and even some questing areas, choosing a server is a much less meaningful action. Cross-server interactions make players anonymous faces in a sea of characters – without identity, without reputation, and without a stable server-based community of players. While more characters present in a given area may provide the illusion of community (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Farzan et al., 2011; Kreijns et al., 2004), social presence alone is not enough to maintain sociality.

Vanilla WoW also offered specific places in the game world that encouraged players to congregate and socialize with one another. Capital cities, headquarters for each faction, were spaces that promoted sociality by aggregating groups of players in small areas of the game world. Capital cities “create[d] a strong sense of social life embedded in specific game locations” (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). Ironforge and Orgrimmar, the Alliance and Horde capital cities of choice, respectively, were the main hubs where players could “replenish supplies, auction off loot, bump into friends, watch duels, [and] admire the rare mounts of lucky players” (Nardi, 2010). A game’s “[social] experience can be greatly affected by the ‘social architecture’ of its public places” (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). Both cities were centrally located on their continent affording easy access to many different locations for questing. Both had three main congregation points for players: the bank, the mailbox, and the auction house, located closely together. Players needed to interact with these three features frequently during play, which encouraged congregations of characters around these points of interest. Players regularly sent mail to their friends, sold items through the auction house, and managed their resources through the bank. While a player was engaged in these activities, she was guaranteed to see others (see Figure 7.2), creating a sense of social presence (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Farzan et al., 2011; Kreijns et al.,

2004) and offering opportunities for direct interaction between players. Players clustered in a “deliberately small [enclosure] designed to encourage bonhomie and cordiality among peers” (Nardi, 2010).



**Figure 7.2: The view from the top of the Orgrimmar bank on Nostalrius Begins. Players often gathered on top of the bank during downtime in play. Here, some players are casting a “Hurricane” spell to cause a thunderstorm, just for fun (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016).**

With a limited server size and cities designed to gather players in smaller areas of the game, WoW created a sense of a community through the physical design of its communal spaces (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Nardi, 2010; O’Connor et al., 2015; Steinkuehler, 2005; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). However, Blizzard has changed these spaces so that they no longer afford the same sense of sociality within the community. Instead, these spaces often offer the illusion of social presence, though players interact with one another less. One example that Braithwaite (2015) discussed is “phasing,” which allows players to exist in the same virtual geography without being visible to one another. For example, after completing a particular quest, one character might be “phased” to a different iteration of the geography that has changed in some

way (see Figure 7.3). Decisions like this further fracture the player community and problematize communal spaces. At least some players want communal spaces, as evidenced by the popularity of private servers, such as Nostalrius Begins. Players seeking a more social experience from WoW are subject to the design changes that have permanently altered these spaces for all players, without alternative modes of play supported by Blizzard.



**Figure 7.3: A Goblin stands in two different phases of the same zone. By phasing a zone, Blizzard can change the geography of the game for players at certain points in a narrative line (Screenshot from MMO-Champion 2010).**

### *No Orc is an Island*

Many aspects of WoW’s initial design encouraged player interdependencies that “structured [the game] so that players must interact” (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). These interactions do not necessarily need to lead to long-term interpersonal relationships, but a design that requires players to seek out others for help creates an environment where people expect others to be friendly or social in some way. I address several examples of player interdependencies that contributed to the sense of community within Vanilla WoW.

When creating a character, players can select one of a number of character classes that determine the character’s role, what weapons they can use, what armor they can wear, and so on. Different classes were designed to excel at different tasks in the game, allowing “the classes



asymmetrical strengths and weaknesses [to] encourage collaboration during battle as well as in brief encounters” (Nardi & Harris, 2006). WoW’s three interdependent class types assured that no one character could excel in every aspect of the game, and indicated that players needed to rely on each other to complete certain tasks (Bardzell et al., 2008; Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2012; Braithwaite, 2015; Dabbish et al., 2012). A priest, for example, might seek out the help of a warrior for questing – offering their healing services in exchange for the warrior’s ability to endure excessive amounts of damage (see Figure 7.4). Over time, players could develop social relationships with others through “temporary and permanent alliances to achieve both directed and self-determined goals” (O’Connor et al., 2015). The need for characters with different abilities to complete certain in game activities, such as raids, required players to form networks with others who complemented their character’s skills.



**Figure 7.4: Examples of a Warrior Tank (left) and a Priest Healer (right) (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2008).**

Even within a class or role, players were often required to seek help and knowledge from other more experienced players (Nardi, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2004). Certain class-specific quests required that a player perform difficult tasks that required mastery over their character’s abilities

in order to obtain rare equipment. Many people sought the expertise of more experienced players for tips or advice. Often, these quests led to opportunities for players to connect socially. For example, when I was a young hunter, a more experienced player from my guild spent an afternoon with me in an area of the game teaching me a skill that I needed in order to complete a quest for a rare and powerful bow. While this player did not receive any benefit for helping me, altruistic behaviors such as helping less experienced players were a common part of the game culture (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; O'Connor et al., 2015; Yee, 2010).

Professions allowed players to specialize their character to craft useful equipment, potions, and trinkets. At WoW's release there were nine different professions, but a character could only become proficient in two of them. Thus, a player who selected herbalism and alchemy as their professions would have to seek the help of another player for any blacksmithing or tailoring services and vice versa. Players often built networks with others who had complementary professions so that they could exchange services with one another (Braithwaite, 2015; Ducheneaut et al., 2007). Guilds contained players with complementary professions who helped one another with crafting tasks, meaning that affiliating with a guild gave a player access to more economic resources as well as a social community. At the heart of this design was the notion that no one character could be entirely self-sufficient; players needed to rely on one another in order to succeed. Now, however, players can hire non-player characters (NPCs) who are trained in specific professions, eliminating the need to seek out a social network, and allowing the individual to succeed alone (Braithwaite, 2015). These are the kinds of decisions that change the fundamental infrastructure of the game. While Blizzard made it possible for players to exist (and excel) independently of a social network, there need to be spaces for the people who want to develop within a community.

“Buffs,” temporary spells that offer a beneficial effect to another player, fostered a social ethos by allowing players to strengthen one another through the use of spells. These spells were literally a gift that a player could give to another person in the game world. Nardi and Harris (2006) explain: “Buffs are part of the culture of the game in which players commit small acts of kindness to maintain a mutually beneficial atmosphere even though no immediate reciprocity is in the offing and no rewards such as experience points are gained.” While not a requirement for playing, buffs made play slightly easier by empowering a character. Nardi (2010) explains that it was common courtesy to offer buffs as a greeting when passing another character in the game world, creating an environment of pro-social behaviors. O’Connor et al. (2015) confirm that many players “reported that it was common to give and receive help with practical in-game assistance ... [even] from players with whom there was no prior relationships.” These features fostered a collaborative philosophy within the player community; assistance, reciprocated or not, was a fundamental part of the game play in early WoW. However, in the Legion expansion, Blizzard removed buffs from the game. While I could not find an official statement from Blizzard explaining why buffs were removed, many players speculate that it was yet another endeavor to level the playing field across different types of characters, again emphasizing the individual’s success over the collective’s success. While removing one type of spell may seem like a minor design decision, these actions collectively contribute to an environment that leads to increased social isolation.

The collaborative nature of activities and the social environment in WoW were what made the game so appealing to many players (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Nardi, 2010; O’Connor et al., 2015). Early research on WoW found that 66% of WoW characters were affiliated with guilds, increasing to 90% of characters over level 43 (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Even though this

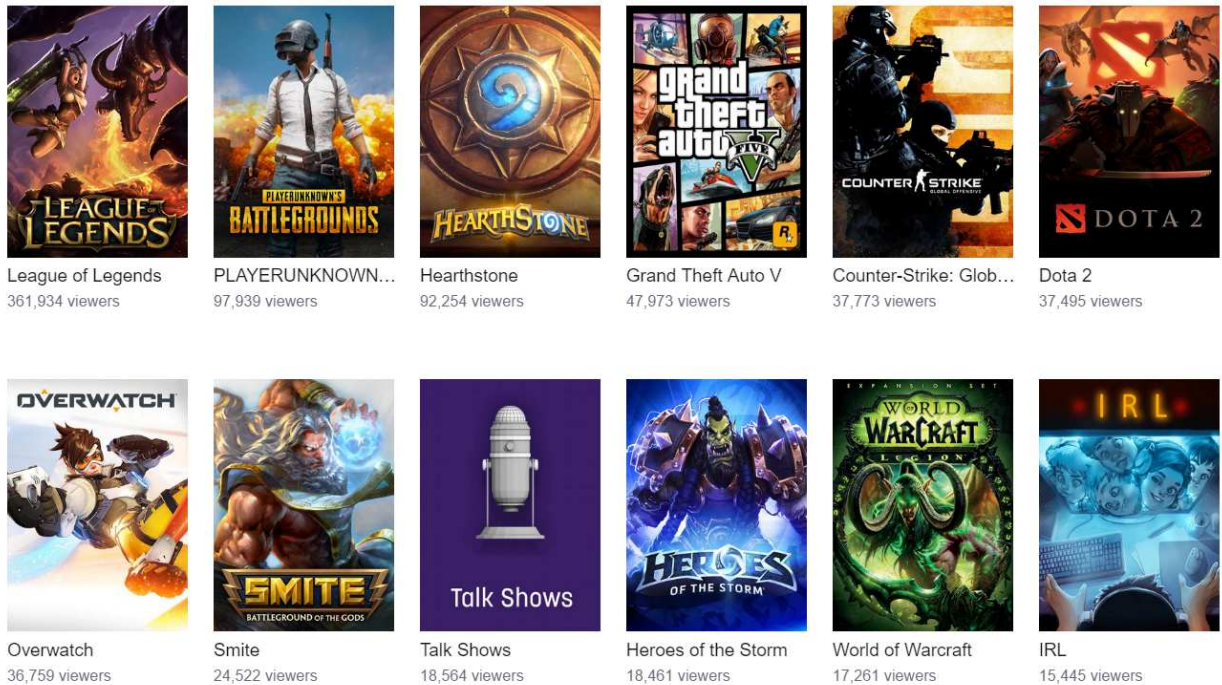
same study found that playing in a group did not result in faster or more efficient leveling, many players chose to play with others anyway (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Why? I argue that players chose a less efficient path for leveling because the game encouraged sociality. Players had resources that encouraged them to be social with one another, such as specialized skills or spells. Social contracts with other players were rewarding because they made more opportunities for play available. Even in situations where a player did not directly interact with others and characters functioned as “an audience” (Ducheneaut et al., 2006) or “a social presence” (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Farzan et al., 2011; Kreijns et al., 2004), the ethos of the in-game community was one of sociality.

### ***Nostalrius Begins and Evolving Game Culture***

Vanilla WoW was, through many aspects of its design, an inherently social space. Why then, did the players on Nostalrius Begin so readily sacrifice sociality in order to emphasize individual performance via metrics? Cultural shifts have dramatically affected the ways that players engage with games and with each other (Bartle, 2009; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2015).

In recent years, game culture has shifted to emphasize eSports, the professionalization of play, and the competitive gaming scene (Heaven, 2014; T. L. Taylor, 2012). Twitch.tv, a popular game streaming service, can show what players are interested in right now (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Tassi, 2013). Popular titles currently on the Twitch homepage (see Figure 7.5) are mostly games with 1) an eSports scene, 2) public leaderboards that rank players’ performance inside or outside of the game, and 3) a win/loss condition inherent to the game’s mechanics that determines player’s success or failure within the game.

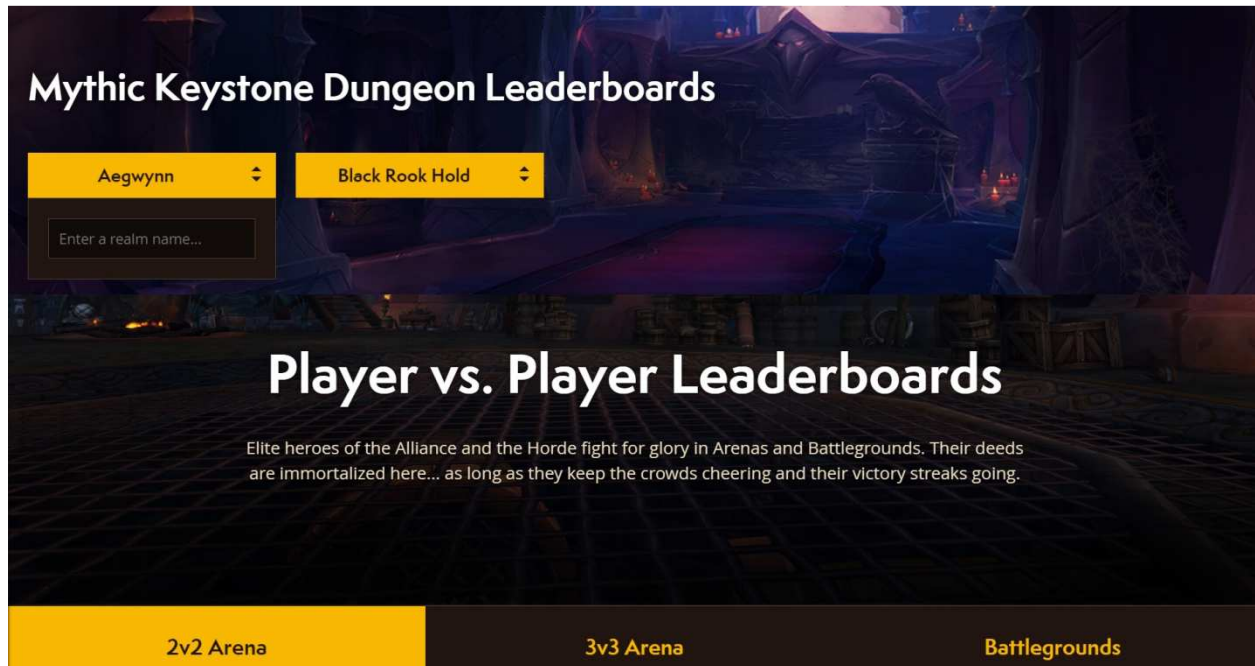
## Featured Games Games people are watching now



**Figure 7.5: Featured games from Twitch.tv's home page. 8 of the 12 titles have in-game or out of game leaderboards (League of Legends, Player Unknown's Battlegrounds, Hearthstone, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Dota 2, Overwatch, Smite, and Heroes of the Storm) and 2 are non-games (i.e., Talk Shows, IRL [In-Real Life]) (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017).**

Many companies host public leaderboards. Blizzard, for example, has public leaderboards available for all of their games on the company's website. Using WoW as an example, the Blizzard website hosts leaderboards for PvP and PvE content (see Figure 7.6). Many of today's most popular games include leaderboards or other ways for players to evaluate their individual contributions, even in a team-focused game. By encouraging speed, drive, and a competitive desire to get ahead of others in order to win or amass more capital, these games encourage efficient play and high performance (Braithwaite, 2015; T. L. Taylor, 2009). But this ethos means that players may sacrifice sociality to improve their efficiency. While I do not have data that specifically explain why players are willing to do this, I would suggest looking to eSports culture to inform this question. It seems that with no way to "win" World of Warcraft,

players and developers have constructed other evaluations of success, pushing the emphasis of the game further towards the ranked, quantitative, performance-based philosophy that permeates eSports.



**Figure 7.6: Screenshots from the World of Warcraft official site for Mythic Keystone Dungeon Leaderboards (top) and Player vs. Player Leaderboards (bottom) (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017).**

While Nardi and Harris (2006) argued that WoW’s original design “provide[d] an innovative space in which strangers collaborate and can become friends,” the game’s current landscape is almost unrecognizable from this picture. Attempts to make it possible for one character to do everything as quickly and efficiently as possible have broken or removed elements of the game that contributed to the sociality that was present in earlier versions. Server communities have been dissolved with the introduction of cross-realm interactions, new and different capital cities have changed where players congregate, and most player interdependencies have been removed to allow for solo play. WoW has transitioned “away from its early emphasis on small- and large-scale group effort and social encounters...[with] fewer

opportunities or incentives to work towards the same virtual goal *with* others” (Braithwaite, 2015).

World of Warcraft is no longer a game that offers a *massively multiplayer* experience, but instead provides a *singleplayer in parallel* experience. Players are content to wander the game world alone, focused only on their own progress with minimal need or desire to interact with others. When Blizzard tried to address players’ concerns about being unable to find groups for activities, they did so by introducing Group Finder – a solution to finding other *virtual bodies*, but not to finding a community. I use the term “virtual bodies” rather than “other players” or “other characters” because these entities are not fully realized social agents. Instead, they function as a means for a player’s ends – a hollow, digital figure whose purpose is to serve the player’s needs. A player is not interested in her group members for the social experience that they might provide, but for how likely they are to provide her opportunities for rare equipment and self-improvement. This change has become a norm within the WoW community, limiting the ways that players engage with the game and altering the ethos of the player community overall.

What alternatives were available for players who did not want to use the Group Finder feature? Players could still use chat channels to form groups, but were often rebuked by others for their attempts, as I mentioned in Chapter 5. Only creating groups from already known players was a possibility, but was a useless solution if a player’s friends were not available when he was. Because Group Finder had become the norm, players effectively had no alternatives for group creation. Players could have benefited from socio-technical systems that allowed them to better manage community formation and maintenance. Instead, Blizzard “[replicated] a rationality that valorizes the individual at the expense of the community and that threatens to undermine our

conditions of civic engagement by situating social life within the metrics of the marketplace” (Braithwaite, 2015). Systems like those in contemporary WoW ensure “that even those who play mainly for the social aspects of the game are drawn into a web of market transactions” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Players need more opportunities to engage in silly and social activities facilitated by the game. Until the pressure to engage in “a web of market transactions” is relaxed, players are likely to continue reinforcing neoliberal values through their play and governance strategies. I am not suggesting that Blizzard change the game for all players, but instead that they offer more opportunities for different types of play. It should be easier for players to find alternatives to a problem, rather than being forced to engage with a system through one “correct” way.

### Community is Not Lost

Community in WoW is not yet lost. World of Warcraft was once social, and some research shows that it still can be. MMOs are inherently social games (Moore et al., 2007). Ducheneaut and Moore (2005) describe playing MMOs as “essentially about hanging out with people...you battle a few orcs and have a lot of laughs with your friends.” Indeed, players often mention sociality as a main motivating force for play in online games (Braithwaite, 2015; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004, 2005; Nardi, 2010; O’Connor et al., 2015; Yee, 2006b, 2014). Bardzell et al. (2008) identified “two primary motivations to [play MMOs] in the first place...the twin desires to advance one’s character by acquiring experience and valuable loot, and the desire to engage in social play.” Later in the same article, they even suggest that players care less about equipment if the group itself is enjoyable and rewarding on its own (Bardzell et al., 2008), a sentiment some of my players from Nostalrius reiterated when reflecting on community in Roasted Quail.



In fact, even small stimuli can increase player sociality. Dabbish et al. (2012) studied communication patterns between players in Group Finder groups using a confederate to instigate chatting within the group. The authors found that “communication early in a group’s history causes members to talk more later on” and “early communication increases [players’] commitment through its influence on group atmosphere” (Dabbish et al., 2012). Interpersonal communication is a key feature that determines whether users build relationships with each other in online communities (Dabbish et al., 2012; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), and online games are no exception. By increasing commitment to a game through improved social features, developers can improve a game’s longevity and player enjoyment overall (Dabbish et al., 2012; Farzan et al., 2011; Tausczik et al., 2014).

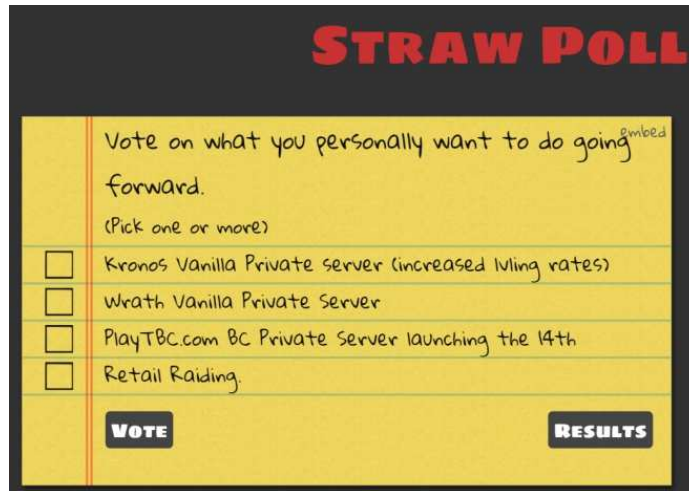
Though players claim to want sociality from their games, and scholars can prompt players to behave socially in research settings, players are not always inclined to behave as such naturally. Why do players behave in ways that devalue community and emphasize the individual’s performance? Even though Vanilla WoW could be described as “a nostalgic ‘utopia...before capitalism’” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), life on Nostalrius Begins was influenced by neoliberal influences that became evident through players’ behaviors. Part of the problem is that many players see others focused on performance-based evaluations, and go along with these behaviors because they become the norm. But what if there were alternatives available? Nostalrius, for example, began as an alternative way to play in response to problematic developments in retail World of Warcraft. Nostalrius was a way to offer another possibility for players who did not want to play in the ways that Blizzard dictated. Nostalrius shows that players were motivated to seek out and provide alternative modes of play for themselves, even when game companies were not.

### ***The Re-Emergence of Community on Nostalrius Begins***

At the end of Nostalrius' lifespan, community re-asserted itself. On April 6, 2016, the Nostalrius Begins home page was changed to an open letter to the community:

*“Yesterday, we received a letter of formal notice from US and french [sic] lawyers, acting on behalf of Blizzard Entertainment, preparing to stand trial against our hosting company OVH and ourselves in less than a week now. This means the de facto end of Nostalrius under its current form...Nostalrius Begins ...will be definitively shutdown at 23:00 server time on the 10th of April 2016”* (“Nostalrius Begins,” 2016).

After the announcement of the server's shut down, I began to see signs of community reappearing. Members of Nostalrius Begins began working to preserve their social relationships, banding together after their community was threatened. For example, even in Impetus, where the raiding ethos had shifted to more neoliberal practices, players were trying to figure out where they could go to could continue playing together. One member of the leadership even created a poll to make a democratic decision about where the guild would move based on overall interest (see Figure 7.7). These developments paralleled Poor and Skoric's (2014, 2016) findings on sociality in long-term online communities, which suggest that people who played together for extended periods of time were more likely to stay together across settings, such as changes between guilds (Poor & Skoric, 2016) or changes between game spaces (Poor & Skoric, 2014).



**Figure 7.7: A poll created by a member of the Impetus leadership to determine where the guild would play together after Nostalrius Begins was shut down (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2016).**

Nostalrius players bombarded the World of Warcraft and Blizzard official Facebook pages with comments. Every company post was met with dozens, and frequently, hundreds, of comments from angry players protesting Blizzard’s decision to take their server away. Despite the prevalence of neoliberal values, once the sever was threatened, players banded together to fight against what they saw as unjust and unfair governance of their gaming experience. This development was unexpected by both myself as a researcher, and by Blizzard itself. Blizzard ignored many of the comments and posts on their sites, but continued pressure from the community and considerable mainstream and gaming news coverage prompted an official statement from J. Allen Brack, Vice President for Blizzard and Production Director for World of Warcraft, on April 26th:

*“We wanted to let you know that we’ve been closely following the Nostalrius discussion and we appreciate your constructive thoughts and suggestions. Our silence on this subject definitely doesn’t reflect our level of engagement and passion around this topic. We hear you...You, the Blizzard community, are the most dedicated, passionate players out there. We thank you for your constructive thoughts and suggestions. We are listening.”* (Brack, 2016)

Though at the time of writing, Blizzard has still not taken any action to offer an alternative or demonstrate how they might be listening to these disenfranchised players, this post was the beginning of a dialogue between Blizzard and the player community that they had alienated in their decision to shut down Nostalrius.

There was an underlying community on Nostalrius Begins that asserted itself when the server was threatened (see Figure 7.8). But why did it take so long and require a particular crisis event? I argue that many online gaming communities struggle with a tension between sociality and the individualistic self-entrepreneurship of neoliberalism. Many popular game titles introduce this tension through the design of the game via narrative conflict (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), requiring players to work together to achieve a common goal; players become motivated to increase their own capital value to increase their worth in collaborative settings. But games also reinforce this tension by rewarding those individual players who perform particularly well even if their performance harms the team's effort as I saw with Impetus' raids.



**Figure 7.8: Players gathered outside of Orgrimmar on Nostalrius Begins to protest Blizzard closing the server (Screenshot from Nostalrius Begins 2016).**

Many players still want a social experience from the games that they play. Players reminisce about Vanilla WoW, for example, because of the sense of the community and the

social interactions (Braithwaite, 2015; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004, 2005; O'Connor et al., 2015; Yee, 2014). However, having the ability to track performance through quantifiable metrics can conflict with players' motivations for social interaction. Instead of viewing other players as social agents with whom to communicate and collaborate, other players become neoliberal objects: things to compete against, tools to improve the effectiveness of the raid group, cogs in a machine whose purpose is to facilitate a player's needs.

### ***How Do We Solve Community?***

Community is not a simple problem to solve. A balance must be struck between the tenebrous relationship between sociality and measured performance. People often emphasize the importance of "atmosphere" in online games as contributing to sociality between players (Bardzell et al., 2008; Dabbish et al., 2012). Designers can use multiple strategies to design a social atmosphere into their games. Farzan et al. (2011) demonstrated that "designs that encourage relationships among members or emphasize the community as an entity both increase commitment and retention of players, but through different routes." Game technologies need to accommodate different types of play. One solution will not solve every problem, and the way that WoW has progressed has solved the issue of finding other players, but problematized the issue of finding a community. Establishing norms and expectations of sociality through a game's design and through players' behaviors can restore aspects of community and increase players' commitment to a game (Dabbish et al., 2012).

Rather than offering one solution to players' problems, designers need to consider ways to offer a multitude of solutions that allow different types of players to engage with a game in different, important ways. In the next chapter, I suggest some potential solutions for providing more opportunities for sociality in World of Warcraft. Players want community from their

games, and research has shown how to provide opportunities for players to flourish in robust online communities. By offering systems that cater to different player needs, developers might be able to undo the social isolation of contemporary WoW and revive the glory days of sociality for which players once praised the game.

## CHAPTER 8: Conclusion

With all of this in mind, what can I say to Blizzard about the ways that they might mediate social experience in World of Warcraft? In this chapter, I begin with a few broad recommendations based on my research findings about World of Warcraft's social community and suggestions for a more holistic approach to game design that still allows for solo play but not in a way that devalues the social. I end the chapter with several concrete suggestions for socio-technical tools that Blizzard could implement to foster more sociality in WoW.

Players need new forms of governance in online games. In MMOs particularly, large player communities are essential for a game's livelihood. I suggest fostering a relationship between players and developers in a way that allows these groups to merge and evolve as a cohesive community. The relationship between developers and players is often viewed as similar to the relationship between a god and its economically-driven minions (Kow & Nardi, 2010b; Tschang & Comas, 2010). However, this is not necessarily the case. Many players actively work to shape their game play experiences by creatively using the tools that designers give them, or, in some cases, making their own. Player-created content is one way that players are incorporating themselves into the design process and taking agency over their play experiences. Scholars who have examined participatory design (Gregory, 2003; Prax, 2016; Schuler & Namioka, 1993), co-creative game design (Prax, 2011, 2015, 2016; Taylor, 2007), and productive play (Bardzell, Bardzell, Pace, & Reed, 2008; Humphreys, 2005; Lindtner, Mainwaring, Dourish, & Wang, 2009; Pearce, 2006; Wang, 2015) propose an arrangement where players and designers create content together.

One type of player-created content, "mods" (short for "modifications") allow players to customize their game play experience by adding features to the game itself (Altizer Jr, 2013;

Kow & Nardi, 2010a, 2010c, 2010b; Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2007; Scacchi, 2010; Taylor, 2007). The modding community has been particularly influential on WoW's longevity, with some mods even being incorporated into later versions of the official game (Kow & Nardi, 2010a, 2010c; Nardi, 2010). Postigo (2007) suggests that mods contribute to "the time a game remains a subject of active involvement with the consumer base." Mods can bring new innovations to games (Prax, 2011, 2015), improve the attractiveness and playability of a game (Taylor, 2007), and foster an environment of creativity in gaming communities (Kow & Nardi, 2010b). Modding is a way for players to have agency in cultivating the types of experiences that they want from games.

But modding in a game that is legally owned by a corporation introduces problems for intellectual property rights (Altizer Jr, 2013; Kow & Nardi, 2010c, 2010a; Kücklich, 2005; Taylor, 2002) and compensation for players' labor (Ekbia & Nardi, 2017; Humphreys, 2005; Kow & Nardi, 2010a, 2010c; Postigo, 2007; Prax, 2015; Taylor, 2007). The tenuous relationship between player creativity and developer legal control complicates opportunities for players' involvement in the development process – as I saw when Blizzard issued a cease and desist to the Nostalrius Begins developers. Players are allowed creative freedoms, as long as their creativity is deemed acceptable by Blizzard. Indeed, legal policies have already affected innovation within WoW's modding community (Kow & Nardi, 2010c). By subscribing to strict intellectual property laws, Blizzard may be stifling the creativity of their community and diminishing players' agency over their gaming experiences. While many players were willing to create and maintain mods as "a labor of love," Blizzard's tight governance of their products has pushed away some members of the modding community (Kow & Nardi, 2010c).



Many of Blizzard's changes to WoW were implemented to make some aspects of the game (e.g., raiding) accessible to broader range of players. However, I suggest that not all the content in a game needs to be experienced by all of the players in that game. Cooking, for example, is a secondary profession in World of Warcraft that requires a player to collect additional resources in the game in order to create consumable items. World of Wargraphs, a player-run site that collects data on PvE and PvP behaviors in World of Warcraft, calculates that roughly 9% of characters have maximized their Cooking skill as of April 2017<sup>9</sup> (World of Wargraphs, 2017). However, with every expansion, Blizzard adds new recipes and new cooking rewards that less than a tenth of the player population will experience. Why then, must Blizzard change other aspects of the game to accommodate more players?

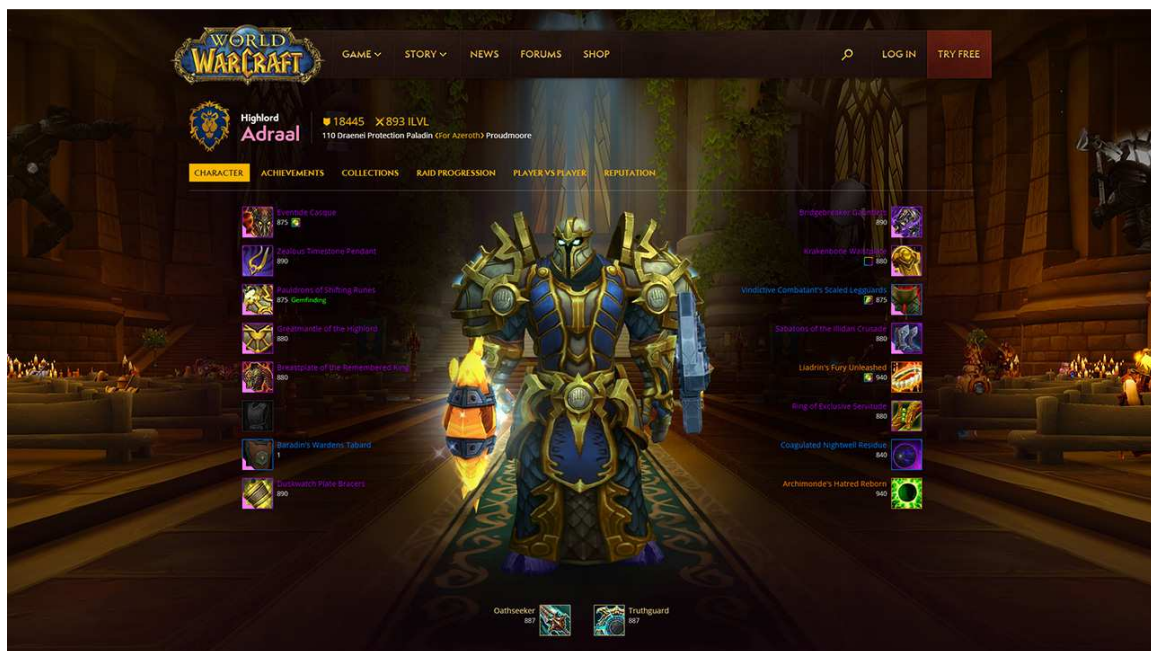
Blizzard might argue that features like Cooking have been available to everyone since the beginning of the game, and thus have become a staple of the World of Warcraft experience. Similarly, adding content like new recipes or new fish are simple technical interventions, while restructuring server architecture or creating new interfaces are more difficult. However, just because the changes that I suggest are more complex, does not mean that Blizzard should ignore them. It is often these complex changes that can contribute to cascading effects within the player community. With a large portion of the player population decrying the state of sociality in World of Warcraft, Blizzard needs to consider ways to answer these players. After all, a line in Blizzard's mission statement claims that "every voice matters," why should these players seeking different ways to play World of Warcraft be any different?

While changes to WoW that made in-game activities such as raiding accessible to a wider audience were intended to help players find others with whom to play, the systems currently in

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<sup>9</sup> For comparison, roughly 25% of characters have Fishing, another secondary profession, fully leveled.

place do little more than find other virtual bodies. I argue that World of Warcraft's community could benefit from providing systems that let players find others with like-minded play preferences. Private servers did this by offering different versions of the game that catered to different types of players. I understand that offering multiple versions of a game is difficult for legal and brand-related reasons. However, I think that Blizzard could offer features that allow players to better self-organize – and clearly there is a need for such tools. For example, in May 2017, Blizzard introduced a new character profile page (see Figure 8.1).



**Figure 8.1: The New World of Warcraft Character Profile including tabs for the Character, Achievements, Collections, Raid Progressions, Player vs. Player, and Reputation (Screenshot from Blizzard Entertainment 2017).**

The information aggregated in the profile comes from in-game data about a character, much in the same way that RealmPlayers collected data. However, as with RealmPlayers, the information provided only includes quantifiable information. There is no information on when a player enjoys playing most, what areas of the game they prefer spending time in, what activities they enjoy doing, which pets and mounts are their favorite to use, what type of play experiences they are looking for, and so on. Modifying these tools to allow players to use them for social

networking could offer more opportunities for players to find others with whom to play, and create more opportunities for sociality within the WoW community.

### Suggestions for More Opportunities for Social Play

Given what I have learned about social affordances in World of Warcraft, I argue that game developers should consider alternatives for different kinds of play. One version of a technology will not cater to every user perfectly. However, different features within software can appeal to different users, broadening the user base and improving the accessibility of the technology for users with different desires. I consider several potential solutions for more social play including merged realms, social servers, socio-technical management tools for guilds, and positive externalities. While I have not had any way to empirically test these suggestions, I argue that they serve as a foundation for future discussions about designing for social experience in online games.

#### ***Merged Realms***

Blizzard currently offers “Coalesced Realms” and “Connected Realms” for different cross-realm functionality. Coalesced Realms allow players from different servers to temporarily interact in cross-realm zones, and were implemented to make areas of the game world feel more populated. Players can tell which characters come from a realm outside of their own because of an additional indicator that appears next to the character’s name. Coalesced players are limited in the types of interactions they are allowed to have with others; for example, trading is not possible. Connected Realms, on the other hand, allow members from different servers to interact as though they were members of the same server – allowing people to play together even outside of cross-realm zones, trade gold and items with one another, and share the same auction house.

However, players are still demarcated with a “(\*)” symbol to indicate when a character is a member of a different server (see Figure 8.2).



**Figure 8.2: An overview of cross-realm character indicators. Though players from different realms can group together, they are marked with (\*) on their character plate at the top of the screen and over their character model. In the party window, the character’s server is listed next to their name (Screenshot by Crenshaw 2017).**

While Blizzard has taken steps to improve interactions between players on different servers, there are still barriers that prevent server communities from being what they were in Vanilla WoW. Since characters are marked, literally, if they are affiliated with a different realm, one of the first pieces of information that a player has is whether or not another person is a member of their community. Identifying characters in this way lends itself too easily to in-group bias and “othering” of people (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), where players can easily identify members outside of their own server, even if they can interact with them in the same way as a person from their home server. This information can also be disruptive to the immersive

experience that WoW tries to create by either adding a lengthy server name or a symbol to the end of a character's name.

Rather than trying to support relationships between players on different servers, I suggest that Blizzard merge connected or coalesced realms into unified servers. For example, the Aegwynn, Bonechewer, Daggertspine, Gurubashi, and Hakkar servers are currently all Connected Realms. Instead, Blizzard should combine these multiple servers into one which maintains a name that is of a similar aesthetic to the original servers for immersion purposes (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2014). By merging servers, players would share a common identity. Rather than a player being affiliated with the Bonechewer server, the Vengeance battleground, and connected with the Aegwynn, Daggertspine, Gurubashi, and Hakkar servers, there would be a single, unifying identity for members of a server. Some players are already trying to do this in their advertisement of guilds. While guilds are now allowed to include players from clusters of Connected Realms, many players specify in their advertisements that they are only looking for players on one or two specific servers. I am not sure why Blizzard has not implemented something like this, and instead chose to further alter cross-realm functionality. However, it does not seem likely that the social experience that players are looking for from their server-based communities will happen with the current systems of realms' architecture.

### ***Social Servers***

Blizzard can also provide identifiable spaces for players who want a social WOW experience. World of Warcraft realms are already specialized and identified to accommodate certain play styles. For example, "Player versus Player" (PvP) realms allow for spontaneous combat between players where one player kills another, while "Player versus Environment" (PvE) realms do not. Some players love the sense of danger and excitement, while others loathe

constantly being on the lookout to avoid being killed. Blizzard provides support for both kinds of player. I advocate for the development of some servers that remove cross-realm aspects of the game. These servers could even include features like Group Finder, but limit the interface to only players within the server. Those interested in pursuing social interactions with their fellow players and developing a server community could select these realms, while people interested in solo play or fast, efficient progress in the game, could select others. Providing more options accommodates different play styles and affords a range of social experiences.

### ***Socio-Technical Guild Tools***

Guilds, the cornerstone of sociality in WoW, allowed players to build and manage their own small communities within a server (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009; Eklund & Johansson, 2013; Nardi, 2010; Silverman & Simon, 2009). Players in guilds tended to play more (Ducheneaut et al., 2006) and have more social experiences than those who were not in guilds (Williams et al., 2006). One factor that contributed to guilds' inherent social nature was their chat affordances. Players in a guild received access to a private chat only for characters affiliated with the guild. Guild chat channels afforded a space for friendly banter, game related or otherwise (Nardi, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006). Indeed, guilds were often sites for players to “[give] emotional support to, and [receive] emotional support from, other guildmates and close friends” (O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015).

Maintaining membership in a guild required players to navigate a social network that was smaller than a server, but much more interconnected. The reward for affiliating with a guild was access to content that was impossible to complete alone, namely, raids. These group activities “generated closeness and social cohesion; players depended on the [guild] with which they faced

the game's biggest challenges" (Nardi, 2010). I argue that Blizzard could improve socio-technical tools related to guilds to solve the same problem that Group Finder did (i.e., finding others for group activities), while also encouraging players to participate in small guild-based communities.

While WoW's original design allowed for some social management within guilds, many players used tools outside of the game, such as websites, forums, and VOIP programs to foster sociality between guild members (Chen, 2012; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Nardi, 2010; Williams et al., 2006). In April 2011 (Patch 4.1.0), Blizzard introduced the Guild Finder interface (see Figure 8.3). While intended to be useful to players, the system is severely lacking. Forum threads can be found as recently as 2016 lamenting the tool's uselessness, and requesting additional features to make the system more usable. Some players refer to suggested changes as "quality of life" updates, but many of these suggestions would result in dramatic changes to the system's functionality. Such changes would include, for example, a guild application interface, time zone specifications, incentives for guilds to advertise, additional criteria for availability (e.g., raiding times), offline invitation privileges, advertisement expirations, additional criteria for guild interests (e.g., social), full roster information, and management permissions for members beyond the guild leader. Players still need to venture outside of the game to gather the information that they might need before joining a guild.



**Figure 8.3: The Guild Finder Interface.** Players can browse guilds according to the Guild's Interests, Availability, and Class Roles that the guild needs. While browsing, players can see how many members of the guild are online and what level the guild is.

While it is clear that Blizzard is attempting to address sociality in WoW by introducing socio-technical tools that are intended to help players find communities, the tools themselves do not reflect the ways that players engage with the game, nor are they useful for what players need. The Guild Finder interface, for example, has not seen any changes since its release in 2011. As it stands, many players largely disregard the system. Instead, guilds often opt to send out spam messages and guild invites to any player without a guild affiliation<sup>10</sup>. The landscape of WoW has changed significantly in the six years since the interface's introduction, but many players still use systems external to World of Warcraft for guild recruitment and management. These systems need to be brought into the game world to make the process of finding, applying, and joining a

<sup>10</sup> In fact, even during the brief period of time that I was logged on to World of Warcraft to obtain screenshots of the Guild Finder interface I received one of these spam messages coupled with an invitation to a random guild.



guild more accessible to players who do not know where they might look for a guild outside of the game.

### ***Positive Externalities***

Positive externalities are incentives that allow a player to use their resources not only to benefit themselves, but also to benefit those around them (Lewis-Evans, 2017). In games, this might include the ability to purchase something for yourself that also affects your party members or other guild members – for example, faster leveling, additional items, and so on. Lewis-Evans (2017) claims that offering players access to positive externalities in games, developers can say to their players “by contributing to this game, you're part of something bigger. You're helping friends. Also, if you've already spent as [much] you want to help yourself, you can continue to spend to help other people and feel like a good person.” While World of Warcraft offers guild perks that encourage players to affiliate with the same guild over time in order to obtain certain benefits, I argue that Blizzard can offer other types of positive externalities, such as re-including buffs, that can make helping others in World of Warcraft a rewarding experience. By providing more ways for players to derive enjoyment from offering assistance to one another, Blizzard can revive the ethos of altruism and sociality that was present in earlier versions of the game (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Nardi & Harris, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2015).

### **Summary**

My dissertation research demonstrates how the social experience in WoW was altered as a result of changes in the game's design and influences from cultural ideologies. Given that online communities are a significant venue for social life in the contemporary world, as has been amply documented in my work and across the literature (Boellstorff, 2008; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Nardi, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015; Pearce, 2011; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006;

Tanenbaum, Seif El-Nasr, & Nixon, 2014; Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012; Williams et al., 2006), developers should be flexible about maintaining different kinds of worlds to accommodate different kinds of players.

World of Warcraft's player community demonstrates that there is a demand for worlds that encourage, and even reward, collaborating and socializing. While some players attempted to recreate that experience on their own, I found that it is hard to escape ideological influences. Neoliberal ideological values are embedded into the games and online communities that we create. While *Nostalrius Begins* originally intended to bring back a nostalgic, Vanilla WoW experience, players were influenced by the neoliberal ideology that encouraged them to see each other as competitors rather than collaborators. The guild leadership in *Impetus* used algorithms to create an environment that prioritized the individual over the collective. However, it was clear that a strong community was present, as it emerged when the server was threatened. Many players want to be social and altruistic in their gaming, but they need developers to design worlds that encourage these behaviors alongside individual achievements and progression. Creating a virtual world that provides players with the optimal ratio of challenge, social experience, and competition is not an easy task, but by offering different kinds of worlds or different solutions to a problem, developers can cater to broader audiences and provide diverse social experiences.

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