

Multimodality as a Sociolinguistic Resource

by

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This work explores the use of multimodal communication in a community of expert *World of Warcraft*® players and its impact on politeness, identity, and relationships. Players in the community regularly communicated using three linguistic modes quasi-simultaneously: text chat, voice chat, and face-to-face interaction. Using the ethnographic methods of observation, interviews, discourse analysis, and autoethnographic writing, modes are presented with a dual-function: as resources to use within interactions, as well as heuristics which shape the form of interactions. Within interactions, the modal affordances constrain the use of modes, leading to the phenomenon of *mode-switching* within individual interactions to take advantage of these differences. Not all players make the same choices, however; player identity is a factor influencing mode choice in broader interactional contexts. The assumed heterosexual masculinity of the *World of Warcraft* culture results in non-native English speakers, young players, non-heterosexual players, and women reporting avoidance of voice chat in situations with uncertain social expectations because they may face harassment about their identities. However, habitual avoidance of voice chat is also practiced by isolated individuals who engage in identity deception, resulting in voice chat avoidance being a marked practice that raises suspicions about player identity. Because multimodal communication is an essential component of interaction in the community, players who do not identify as heterosexual adult males find

themselves in a double-bind of potential harassment or if they do use voice chat and suspicion if they do not, both of which may result in exclusion from communities and activities. This work demonstrates that multimodal discourse analysis, though often overlooked, is an essential component of research on virtual communities. Modes of communication are embedded in the linguistic fabric of a community, and choice of mode is a salient resource for navigating the social landscape.

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PREFACE

Some introductory notes are required before reading this dissertation. First, in writing this work, I assume that readers have a basic knowledge of the Internet and computers, as well as principles of computer-mediated communication. (I recommend Thurlow et al.'s 2004 textbook *Computer-Mediated Communication* as a grounding for this knowledge.) A working knowledge of online gaming is not strictly required, although it will certainly be useful. Second, this work does not neatly fit into disciplinary categories, and as such some definitions and terms will be different across disciplines. In these cases, I attempt to clearly define the terms I am using and pinpoint their origin at first use. A list of transcription conventions is provided in Appendix A to assist with reading transcripts of talk and text throughout the work.

World of Warcraft® is a trademark or registered trademark of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., in the U.S. and/or other countries. All images used in this dissertation from *World of Warcraft*® were taken by the author (except where indicated), and are copyright to Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. (2004).

This dissertation would not have been possible without the contributions of a lot of people who have helped me on the way. First, I am indebted to my guild, <SeeD>, and the hundreds (thousands?) of members who have come and gone throughout the years. You guys made this possible, each and every one of you, even the ones I don't like very much. You all taught me so much. I can particularly thank a few of you who consciously and thoughtfully

offered your help: Ashleigh, Cari, Ed, Ryan, Nate, Justin, Steven, John, and Jon. If you are not on this list, please don't take it as a slight.

Along the way, I have been the beneficiary of a multitude of brilliant and insightful people who have offered their advice and support throughout the whole process. You are too numerous to name, but you include: my undergraduate RAs (Michelle Moser, Michelle Echols, Samantha Keeler, Lauren Kwak, Rosa McGill, and Maggie Shipley) who helped so much with transcription; my department colleagues at Pitt and CMU who asked about my project and offered their insights (particularly Ben Friedline, who started this project with me way back in 2007, and Fawn Draucker and Kristopher Geda who perhaps unknowingly inspired me to keep writing and working); folks who made brilliant and insightful comments at conferences (thank you Twitter followers!); friends and family who let me ramble on forever about my research; and even the barista with the [Epic Purple Shirt] who talked to me for an hour about how cool *World of Warcraft* is. And, of course, my partner, the smartest person I know, who always showed interest and even came along for the ride sometimes.

Third, my committee (including those from previous projects: David Mortensen, Claude Mauk, Paul Hopper, and Sara Kajder), for putting up with my wacky research topic, for being interdisciplinary, and for just generally believing in me all the way. Especially Scott Kiesling, for being my advisor for seven (*seven!*) years and never once telling me that something was impossible.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my parents, without whom I would never have found this passion. My mother, who enabled me when I really wanted that SegaCD system (a poor investment, looking back on it), and who took me to the arcade after school and let me play games until I had to be somewhere else. My father, who played *Mickey's Space Adventure* on

our Tandy1000 with me when I could barely read, and who bought that Nintendo Entertainment System way back in 1989 because he wanted to play *Super Mario Bros.*, and who will not be here to see me walk during graduation or finally become Doctor Collister.

1.0 A NOOB'S TALE

It is June of 2007, and I arrive in Azeroth quietly and without fanfare. Besides me, nobody sees my *World of Warcraft* character Parnopaeus spring suddenly into existence in the forest of Teldrassil, and no other living eyes watch my avatar jerk back and forth as I, the player, try to learn to control her. I push the directional arrow keys to move Parnopaeus through the world, running into trees and using the space bar to jump over objects. I wander far away in my explorations, and soon enough I discover hostile enemy creatures. Because *World of Warcraft* is a fantasy style game, and I know from experience that slaying creatures is an inevitable part of a game like this, I attempt to slay a panther called a Duskstalker. I frantically push the keys on my keyboard to activate my bow and arrow; unfortunately, my character does not actually have a bow and arrow yet, and I have to run back to safety before the Duskstalker kills me. I return to the place I started and I am still the only player here.

I look in the shaded box on the lower left corner of my screen, and notice an alert that I had entered the chat channel [1. General – Teldrassil]. I minimize the *World of Warcraft* window on my computer screen and consult the online beginner's manual in my browser window; there, I learn that by pressing the Enter key and typing /1, I could type a message in that chat channel. I go back to my *World of Warcraft* window and follow the instructions, and send the following message to General chat:

```
[General - Teldrassil] Parnopaeus: Hi, anyone here?
```

Expecting people to greet me or start a conversation, I wait. I had experienced other chat functions in other online communities, and so I anticipate that they will be used similarly in this new environment. While I wait, I interact with non-player characters, or *NPCs*, controlled by the game's programming to guide new players like me in our first moments in the new world. They are distinguished by the green color of their names and the way the mouse cursor changes shape when hovered over them. These *NPCs* are not other players, but they give me *quests*, or tasks to complete for gold and supplies. I spend time collecting two *quests* while I watch the chat box, which remains depressingly empty. Nobody responds to my greeting, which makes me feel very much alone. *World of Warcraft*, I had been told, had at least eight million players -- where is everybody? There I am, atop the great tree Teldrassil where the race of Night Elves make their home, with not a single other player in sight.

One Night Elf *NPC* with a large yellow exclamation mark over his head has given me a *quest* to slay those spotted panthers called Duskstalkers. With the newly-gained knowledge of my in-game abilities, I return to the spot where I had earlier found the Duskstalkers, and attack one with the dagger that Parnopaeus has equipped. Pushing the attack button causes Parnopaeus to reach out with her right hand and strike the Duskstalker, and I watch as she performs this same move three or four times with little effect. The Duskstalker, meanwhile, attacks back -- and only then do I notice that this Duskstalker is two *levels* higher than me, meaning that it is both stronger and more resilient than Parnopaeus. With one swipe of its paw, my character's health bar decreases by half; with another swipe, I achieve my first death in Azeroth.

Death is not permanent, I learn -- after dying, the screen changes to black and white and I am allowed to control Parnopaeus's spirit to regain her corporeal form. After guiding the spirit back to the body, Parnopaeus resurrects with all of her armor and weapons intact. This time, I am

smarter about the Duskstalker I choose to fight – I check to make sure they are the same level as Parnopaeus before I attack them, and I am able to defeat them and complete the quest I was given. The entire time I am fighting the Duskstalkers, I keep watch on the chat box just in case any other player should choose to interact. No one does.

I play for two hours, sitting on the couch while my girlfriend watches television, occasionally finding myself losing interest in the game and gazing from one screen to the other. In this span of time, one of the quests rewards me with a bow and a quiver of arrows for Parnopaeus, allowing me to use her “Shoot” ability which makes defeating enemies much easier. By the end of my two hours of play, Parnopaeus has gained six levels by killing panthers and demons and collecting *experience points*. She has also learned new abilities with each level, which has also made her strong enough to defeat all of the enemies in the area. She has also died five times in the process.

Bored with the game, I exit *World of Warcraft* and turn off my laptop. In two hours, I had not encountered another player in this virtual world, and I find myself wondering what the big deal was about this game that it had so many players.

After dinner the next day, I log in to *World of Warcraft* and again play Parnopaeus. Remembering the skills I had learned the previous day, I find more NPCs and complete more quests. In one hour, I die only twice and complete enough quests to reach level ten. At this point, I learn the key to survival in this world as a member of the hunter class: taming pets. A hunter trainer NPC in the game world teaches me an ability that allows Parnopaeus to charm wild beasts into being her companions and, importantly, helping her slay enemies. I already know which beast I wanted to tame -- the Duskstalker, the spotted panther creature that had delivered my first

death in the game world the day before. I run Parnopaeus over to the Duskstalker area, prepare to use my new ability on the creature, and suddenly – another player appears.

Her name, Skywlker, appears in white above her head, and she is moving around in the world like I am. She appears to be female and a fellow Night Elf. I hover my mouse over her, and an information box (“tooltip”) appears, telling me that her class is a druid and that she is level 11. Excited to encounter another player, I type in [General – Teldrassil] chat again:

```
[General - Teldrassil] Parnopaeus: Hi Skywlker.
```

I wait patiently, leaving Parnopaeus standing in place. Skywlker continues to move about in the world, casting her druid spells on the Duskstalker that I had wanted to tame to be my companion. Her avoidance of interaction confuses me -- had I done something wrong? How am I supposed to communicate with this person?

I consult the online *World of Warcraft* manual again, and discover that there are other chat channels like [Trade], but also private messages (called “whispers”) and a speech-bubble creator called “say”. Thinking that she might notice me if I use another channel, I try “say” by pressing the Enter key and typing /say, then sending my message.

```
Parnopaeus says: Hi Skywlker, I want to tame one of those  
duskstalkers, can you help me?
```

These words appear both in the shaded chat box on the lower left side of my screen, but also as a speech bubble above Parnopaeus’s head. After I type this, Skywlker stops moving, turns, and faces me! I watch her avatar lift her hands, and suddenly a green aura surrounds my avatar. Green numbers float above my head and my health bar increases. I know enough about gaming to understand that green numbers mean she had cast a healing spell on me. I press the Enter key to open the chat box to thank her, but before I can type anything I see the following appear on my screen:

Skywlker points at Duskstalker.

I understand the message: Skywlker is going to heal me while I tame my pet. I target the Duskstalker and use my brand new [Tame Beast] ability on it. The Duskstalker attacks me while I am in the process of casting the long spell, but Skywlker stays and continues to heal me as I try to tame it. After thirty seconds of repeated attempts to tame the creature, the ability works, and the Duskstalker's name changes to "Cat – Parnopaeus's Pet" and it wanders over to Parnopaeus's side. I had done it! I open the chat box again and type:

Parnopaeus says: Thanks for your help!

Skywlker cheers at you.

Skywlker casts one more healing spell on me and turns back to her task of killing Duskstalkers.

I turn my laptop screen toward my girlfriend, who is sitting next to me playing *Final Fantasy XII* on the Playstation 2. "Look at this cool cat I got, and this nice person helped me get it," I tell her. She looks at my screen, grins and gives me a high-five. We both go back to playing our respective games.

This, my arrival story, was also my introduction to multimodality in *World of Warcraft*.

1.1 THE COMPLEX GAME

World of Warcraft is an immersive experience, and that is the facet of the game that made it the most popular massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) since its release in 2004. Anyone who has spent time in Azeroth, the fantasy-style virtual world in which the game is set, can describe the myriad ways that Blizzard Entertainment, the game's manufacturer, has

designed *WoW* to catch a player's attention. In the beginning, as I described above, it is the game mechanics and the quests that direct players to deeds and exploration in the game world; however, as one progresses, the immersion comes just as much in interacting with other players inside and outside, but always around, Azeroth. The immersive aspect combined with the accessibility of the game (low cost, low-end system requirements, and well-made playing tutorials) have all contributed to the success of *WoW* that has led to four expansions¹ to the original game to add content and keep players coming back for more of the *WoW* experience.

When I arrived in Azeroth as Parnopaeus the Night Elf hunter, I went through the process of learning how to play. This was not just controlling the character and avoiding death while battling Duskstalkers, but also learning how to communicate. I made my first communicative error by using the [General – Teldrassil] chat channel, accessible to players in the Teldrassil zone, to attempt to start small talk. It is rare to use these channels for just conversation, which is a marked difference from other public chat channels in other mediums. [General] chat, wherever it may occur but especially in new-character starter zones like Teldrassil, is used for announcements of important events (such as an invading enemy player or a sighting of an extremely rare creature) or asking questions. It is not for chit-chat, and certainly not for conversing with one particular other player like I tried to do with Skywlker. Communicating one-on-one is best done in private messages, called whispers, or the /say function that I successfully used. Early in my play history, I was already learning social conventions for communication both from the online manual and from watching more experienced players.

Complicating the task of communication, players must also pay attention to many different sources of stimuli as they play a game like *World of Warcraft*: the visual field, the text

¹ *The Burning Crusade*, 2007; *Wrath of the Lich King*, 2008; *Cataclysm*, 2010; *Mists of Pandaria*, 2012.

in the chat box, the *action bars* which contain their available spells and abilities, and the character's portrait information which contains an indicator of their health. As a beginning player (derogatorily called a *noob*), I struggled to direct my attention to the appropriate places. I did not watch my health bar in my character's portrait, so I did not anticipate my impending death in my first battle with the Duskstalker. Over time, I developed the knowledge of where my attention was needed in order to survive; I was also gaining knowledge of the layout of the virtual world.

Outside of the game itself, however, there were other things that captured my attention. While I played, I directed my attention at times to objects and people in my environment: the television program, showing my girlfriend my accomplishments in the game, the other video game that my girlfriend was playing, the online manual that I had to consult from time to time. All of these mediums competed with the game for my attention – *World of Warcraft* is not the only object in the environment during play, and dividing one's attention is perhaps the most difficult aspect of becoming a competent *World of Warcraft* player.

Aside from paying attention to the game, one of the ways that someone becomes “good” at playing *World of Warcraft* is to learn how to collaborate with other players. The pinnacle of the game for many of its eleven million players is what is known as *end-game* play: the things that happen after you have mastered control of the character and interaction using chat channels, when you have completed enough quests and gained as many levels as you can. The most prototypical end-game event is called a raid, in which players must team up in groups of ten to forty in order to defeat a particularly difficult enemy *boss* by executing complex strategies. Each player has a role to play in raid encounters, and all players are responsible for doing their job and reacting to events in the game world. The only way to defeat the boss is to execute the strategy perfectly, which requires all players to perform their job and collaborate with others. This

involves communication, and as I learned much later, that communication occurs in many different linguistic modes.

Playing *World of Warcraft*, whether you are an expert or a noob, is a complex and immersive experience. Part of that complexity is the multimodal nature of the game as well as the multimodal nature of the environments in which players engage with the game. While all digital games are multimodal – they contain a visual representation of the world, written text (both onscreen and in accompanying manuals), a tactile interface in the form of a keyboard, mouse, or game controller, as well as the physical environment that the player is situated in which may include other people, animals, or objects which require one’s attention – in *World of Warcraft*, the nature of communication with other players adds another layer to the multimodality. Players interact not only in a variety of text-based channels (each of which has its own norms), but also in a variety of voice-based mediums (which have even more norms that must be learned). Learning to navigate the multimodal landscape is a primary component of learning to play a game like *World of Warcraft*, and is a skill that increasingly important in managing digital interactions of all types. Theorists like Norris (2004: 9) and Van Leeuwen (2004: 10) suggest that every interaction we have – even face-to-face ones that have been studied by linguists for decades – is inherently multimodal because it includes not just the auditory signal but also the gesture, positioning, posture, and appearance of our interlocutors. Even telephone conversations, during which we interact only with the voice of our interlocutors without being able to look at them, are multimodal in that we have an object (the telephone) mediating our talk that we must attend to by holding it in certain positions, adjusting the volume, and any of the other things one does with a telephone. In addition to the talk and the mediating

instrument, each interlocutor has his or her own visual field which may require attention or distract from the ongoing conversation.

The title of this work is “Multimodality as a Sociolinguistic Resource”, which describes my theoretical positioning: the use of these many linguistic modes is not just a matter of what form one’s talk takes, but also the social nature of talk. Telephoning someone and listening to their voice is a vastly different social experience than writing a letter or sending a text message, and all of these modes can be used for different social reasons. In this work, I explore how the many modes of communication in one environment – *World of Warcraft* – function as a social and linguistic resource in a community of players. Players are not necessarily linguistically multi-tasking in this immersive multimodal environment; although there is an element of multi-tasking involved, mostly players are making strategic choices about their use of the modes in order to adhere to social norms and attend to relationships with their in-game comrades.

The focus of this work is not on the noobs but on the experienced players who have mastered the game’s functions and who know the unspoken rules for communication in game environments. As I played the game as a researcher, my competence as a player grew. After a year of playing, I had mastered the controls of the game and found myself immersed in the expert player environment alongside seasoned gamers. It was in this community that I discovered that the norms of interaction in the multimodal game environment were much more complex than I had ever envisioned – and I came to the realization that I, as a researcher, was adhering to the very norms that I wanted to study. In the process of learning from these experienced players, I became one myself.

1.2 THE NOOB GROWN UP

In the spring of 2009, I am Skakavaz, the Draenei paladin, and I am watching twenty-four other avatars jump and sit and dance on my screen at the entrance to the raid instance called Naxxramas. It is a Thursday night, the regular raid night for our team, and we are all preparing to take on the fourteen enemy bosses and get some new armor and weapons for our characters. This raid team has been through Naxxramas the week before, killing all of the enemy bosses. All raid instances, including Naxxramas, reset every week, allowing new opportunities for a team to kill the enemies again to earn more gear, money, and chances at rare items. I have been to Naxxramas myself many times before; I know all the strategies and what I must do as a healer to ensure the success of our team. Beyond simply casting healing spells on those characters who are damaged by the enemies, I have shielding spells that can save someone from certain death. I also have a special role in some of the fights – for example, one of my favorite battles is the one against the undead dog creature Gluth, and it is my duty to chase zombies around and use Skakavaz’s holy magic to keep them away from the rest of my team.

Someone has built a campfire; I move close to it and click the on-screen buttons that command Skakavaz to cook the [Firecracker Salmon] recipe that would increase the potency of her healing spells. A box suddenly pops up in the middle of the screen with an image of a male Draenei and the text “Theon has initiated a readycheck.” My raid leader, Theon, is using an in-game device to ask if the members of the raid team are ready to begin the attack on Naxxramas. I have two options: ready or not ready. I click ready and look at the chat box – in reddish-orange text, I read:

[Raid Leader] Theon: Everybody on Vent please.

I minimize *World of Warcraft* and double-click the Ventrilo icon on my desktop. The third-party voice chat software loads and I am delivered into the LOUNGE channel. I double-click another channel labeled RAIDING to move myself into that channel, where a number of other users are already present and talking. Their names are familiar – they are the members of the raid group I am currently in, the other twenty-four people surrounding my avatar in Naxxramas. The first thing I hear is my friend and fellow guild member, Ajax, saying “We should do a different wing first tonight.”

Naxxramas has four ‘wings’, or areas which a raid team can venture through in any order depending on the preferences of the group. At the moment, I do not particularly care about what order will be chosen to navigate the Naxxramas raid since I have seen it all before. I return to *World of Warcraft* to find that Skakavaz has finished cooking her Firecracker Salmon. I half-listen to the conversation between Ajax and Theon and some others about what part of the raid instance we will tackle first, but my attention is given more to some bright pink text that has appeared in my chat window. It’s a private message from my friend Jahaerys to me.

Jahaerys whispers: Hey do you have any extra health pots? I forgot to restock. >.<

For anyone else, I might instantly refuse, but Jahaerys is my friend and one of the best damage-dealers, or *DPS*, in our raid team. I open Skakavaz’s inventory as the people talking on Ventrilo decide to go to the Plague Wing first. Many of the avatars around me start to run to the left; I remain stationary as I look through my inventory for the health potions that Jahaerys requested. I find that I have twenty health potions, which is more than I need for the night’s raid. I press the R key on my keyboard and the bottom of my chat box expands slightly, and in this box I type a response to Jahaerys.

You whisper: Yeah, I can give you five, is that ok?

Jahaerys whispers: Yeah, I will pay you back after raid!

I find Jahaerys's avatar, click on him to make Skakavaz target him, and then right click the target interface to access a menu. I select "Trade" and a new two-sided box pops up with Skakavaz's picture on one side and Jahaerys's picture on the other. I place the five health potions in my side of the window and click "Accept". I wait for Jahaerys to click "Accept" on his end, and the five health potions are transferred from my inventory to his.

Jahaerys whispers: Thanks!

At the same time, on Ventrilo, I hear Theon's voice. "Ska, J, you guys okay?"

The rest of the group is fighting the first trash mobs (a jargon term for easily defeated enemies that precede a difficult enemy boss), and Theon must have noticed that the two of us had lagged behind. I push down the PAUSE key on my keyboard to activate my microphone on Ventrilo. I speak quietly, "Yeah, I'm coming" as I guide Skakavaz toward the rest of the group.

Ajax jokes on Vent, "You'd better hurry up, this trash might kill us." He is clearly joking because the group has already killed the cluster of enemies.

I hear Jahaerys's voice next. First he laughs, then says, "It's okay if you all die, I'll just feign death." Then I see the bright pink text appear on my screen:

Jahaerys whispers: Theon would so yell at me for forgetting those.

I hit R again and type back to Jahaerys:

You whisper: Don't worry, I won't tell!

1.3 SUMMARY AND PREVIEW

In the two autoethnographic excerpts of this chapter, I have delivered a narrative of experiences in the game world that illuminate some of the main concepts I will be tackling in this dissertation. I have shown just a few of the modes of communication and their roles in complex interactions. The difference between my experience as a noob and my experience as an expert is great – from consulting online manuals to check for the keystrokes to activate a chat channel, to effortlessly switching between the entirely different modes of text chat and voice – and reflect the beginning and end stages of my process of learning the norms for social interaction.

Some of the uses of the modes that I have hinted at involve presence and participation. Jahaerys used a one-to-one private whisper to ask me for health potions, a request that would have been embarrassing to make in front of a large group of other players who are expected to be prepared for a raid; however, my attempt at one-to-one interaction with Skywlker in a public chat channel was ignored. Theon and Ajax discuss an open topic of conversation using voice chat, allowing for the input of other raid members about the group's activities for the night, which players could respond to or ignore as they chose. Game-external environment is important as well, and may distract from the game (such as a television program on in the background) or complement one's game activities (showing off your game achievement to others).

In this work, I will explore the role of these modes in interaction in *World of Warcraft*. I will show how mode functions as a resource to use within interactions as well as a resource to shape interactions. Part One of the analysis will present an exploration of mode as a resource within interaction: Chapter 3 will present a theoretical overview of multimodality to situate the analysis in broader context, Chapter 4 will break down the use of each of the three main communicative modes used by players (text, mediated voice chat, and face-to-face interaction),

and Chapter 5 will detail the phenomenon of *mode-switching* within interactions. Part Two of the dissertation will zoom out to look at mode as a resource to shape interaction and identity: Chapter 6 is an overview of identity in online contexts as related to mode of communication, Chapter 7 will explore the ways that a player's use of voice chat can affect and be affected by identity, and Chapter 8 relates extraordinary cases of infelicitous and deceptive uses of voice chat that reveal expected norms for interaction and authenticity in the community. To begin, however, I will describe the parameters of the study that I conducted in *World of Warcraft* to serve as a grounding for the ensuing analyses. Chapter 2 reveals the methodology that allowed me to make these observations, including a discussion of ethnography and community in *World of Warcraft*.

2.0 METHODS FOR RESEARCHING THE GAME AND ITS PLAYERS

Even the most ambitious researcher could not study the whole of the *World of Warcraft* community. The player population numbered anywhere from eight to twelve million active accounts during my time in the game world. Therefore, it was necessary to study a much smaller population and to situate the study in context of this large group of users – that is, conduct an ethnography. In this chapter, I will describe my methods for collecting data for the ethnography and present an overview of the site of research and how the methods fit into the study.

2.1 METHOD: ETHNOGRAPHY

When I say that I have performed an ethnography of a virtual community, I invoke a method with a long history. Classically in anthropology, ethnography is associated with fieldwork done by a (usually Western) researcher in a (usually indigenous, native, foreign) far-away location (e.g. Bronislaw Malinowski's Trobriand Islands study, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's work on kinship systems, Margaret Mead's work on coming-of-age practices in Samoa, Clifford Geertz's work in Bali). This type of classical or traditional ethnography documents cultural uniqueness, and situates the researcher as an outsider attempting to discern the practices of natives and write about them in a way that is understandable to an outside audience. Doing ethnography, in the words of Clifford Geertz, is about:

“...establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques, and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in ‘thick description’.” (1973:6)

Ethnography requires extensive fieldwork, proficiency in many languages, and the ability of the ethnographer to see beyond the constraints of his or her own cultural expectations. Ethnographic works have given the academic world insights into societies that may have remained hidden, and have provided a wealth of information for understanding human behavior and social structures. The insights of cultural anthropology and ethnography have been adopted in the field of sociolinguistics. Dell Hymes’s classic *Ethnography of Speaking* model (1974) bridged the academic gap between linguistics and ethnography, functioning as a method for analyzing the use of language as part of culture and society. Since then, sociolinguists have incorporated ethnography into the field, including examples like Joel Sherzer’s (1983) study of the Kuna people’s public and private language, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin’s (1984) work on language socialization of children in Samoa, and Niko Besnier’s (1992) investigation of gossip and reported speech on Nukulaelae Atoll. However, this type of ethnographic work, both linguistic and cultural, has garnered criticism as well, from perpetuating colonialist attitudes of native cultures as savage (Clifford, 1988; Fardon, 1990) to fundamental methodology questions about the role of the researcher in the society being studied (Brewer, 1984; LeCompte and Goetz, 1982).

More recently, ethnography has “come home” as researchers have focused on cultures-within-cultures, especially in Western societies. Examples of this type of ethnography are Gary Philipsen’s (1975) work in the Teamsterville suburb of Chicago, Thomas Dunk’s (1991) study of

working-class culture in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Penelope Eckert's (2000) landmark work in sociolinguistics on the Northern Cities Shift in a Detroit high school. In Philipsen's and Dunk's ethnographies, the researcher was a native or near-native of the culture being studied and could fit in with the group and pass as a member; similarly, Eckert situated herself very carefully as a confidant of the students that she studied rather than a voice of authority. This authenticity allowed these researchers the chance to gain insights into the complexities of communities that might not have been revealed to outsiders. One potential criticism of this method is that it is subjective – that is, the researcher will be influenced by his or her own background and experience. This criticism is dealt with by Collins and Gallinat's (2010) edited volume on ways to use the “ethnographic self” as an informant in research. While doing work “at home” is not particularly contentious in the scholarly field at present, doing this type of work produces different challenges to the ethnographer. First, ethnographers must be accountable, both to their informants and to their readers, by clearly presenting their role in the society in which they were doing research. The subjects and informants often speak the language of the ethnographer and can obtain copies of the work; the readers, however, may not speak the language of the community as natively as the ethnographer and thus the writer must take pains to be clear about the ideas and constructs with which they may be intimately familiar. Furthermore, ethnographers in “at home” settings must be careful to hold themselves up for criticism as well and not to allow their own behavior to escape scrutiny. This ethnographic style, referred to as integrated ethnography, allows space for a reflexivity that can be an excellent resource for structuring and understanding culture (Collins and Gallinat, 14-16).

Integrated ethnography is similar in some ways to autoethnography, which is a “method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004:

xix). Autoethnography involves the researcher examining the self, the “ethnographic I”, and writing about the researcher’s own experiences as a way of commenting on culture. Autoethnography is when the researcher is the primary subject and informant of the research project, and can be both intellectually provocative and uncomfortably expository for the writer. Ellis’s (2004) methodological novel about autoethnography reveals the ethical and academic difficulties with writing such a work, including the conflict between theoretical and quantitative methods so embraced in social sciences and the subjective positioning of the researcher that embraces the idea that pure objectivity can never be fully attained.

Objectivity in ethnography is a question that I have grappled with throughout the course of my work, especially since I used the method of participant observation to gather my data. Participant observation is a paradox in itself – one cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, so being a participant-observant researcher is a constant juggling of one’s attention and status. Furthermore, this style of data collection requires the researcher to put herself out there to make mistakes and be judged by members of the community; as Malinowski wrote, “over and over again, I committed breaches of etiquette, which the natives [...] were not slow in pointing out” (1922:8). I reveal one of these instances in the introduction of this work, stumbling to learn the uses of the in-game chat channels -- while the natives did not point out my errors yet, my punishment was the lack of interaction that I sought. I had yet to learn the “unwritten rules” of games that can only be learned through playing them (Sniderman, 1999). One of the benefits of participant-observation ethnography is that this particular method does not view the researcher as a contaminant; rather, it “constantly confronts the differing forms of power and hierarchy produced through fieldwork, not all of which privilege the researcher” (Boellstorff, 2008: 71).

From these methodological concerns, I have created an integrated style of presentation of ethnographic findings in this work. To observe the behaviors of other players, I used tools that are common in participant-observation ethnography – interviews, images, transcripts, and field notes. However, I have also made space in this work for a reflexive view of my own experience during the ethnography, which I present written in an autoethnographic style under the headings “autoethnographic interlude”. These episodes are intended to supplement the observational aspect of this work by turning the analytic focus to an internal view of the ethnographer’s experience. At times, these experiences mirror the experiences of the participants that I have described in the surrounding text; at other times, they highlight the ways that being a researcher shaped the way I viewed events or interacted with the participants themselves. The interludes are presented as additional evidence for the claims that I stake in the text, in a sense presenting to the reader additional information about exactly how I, as the researcher, came to understand the phenomenon being discussed.

This methodological style and presentation is highly valued in virtual ethnographies. Virtual ethnography is, as the term itself suggests, an ethnography that takes place in a virtual context. Corneliussen and Rettberg (2008) have compared being new to virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* to “being an immigrant in a foreign culture” (1); similarly, studying a virtual world as a non-native is like being an ethnographer going to a foreign land. The difference is that these lands and cultures can be accessed at home, using technology that the researcher already possesses. I use the term *virtual* to describe these words, rather than *digital*, *online*, *electronic*, *cyber*, or any other term with a similar meaning, for reasons as those set out by Nardi (2010:18) and, particularly, by Boellstorff in his work on Second Life. Boellstorff writes:

I have difficulty identifying the analytical work “digital” is supposed to accomplish. Since these uses of “digital” imply electronic technology [...], “digital” is a conceptual Klein bottle, incorporating every aspect of contemporary human life under its purview. What, nowadays, is not digital in some way? [...] Just as one can take a social phenomenon and examine it from the perspective of gender, law, or religion, [...] so one can examine a social phenomenon or context from the perspective of technology (for which “digital” appears to be a placeholder). “Digital”, however, is less useful for analyzing cultural logics that do *not* cross what I will term the gap between the virtual and the actual. The virtual and the actual are not reducible to each other, even in their mutual constitution (indeed, precisely because of their mutual constitution). (2008: 18)

Boellstorff goes on, in his ethnography, to show the many ways that Second Life is a culture all its own, where participants resist the infiltration of the actual world (called “real life” by participants) into their virtual existence.

When I use the term “virtual”, I embrace two of the common meanings associated with the term. These associations appear often in the literature on virtual worlds and communities, and are so prevalent that they even appear in common definitions such as the one below from the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

vir-tu-al (adj.) 1. Existing or resulting in essence or effect though not in actual fact, form, or name: *the virtual extinction of the buffalo*. 2. Existing in the mind, especially as a product of the imagination. Used in literary criticism of a text. 3. *Computers* Created, simulated, or carried on by means of a computer or computer network: *virtual conversation in a chatroom*.

When I talk about a virtual society, or a virtual culture, or a virtual interaction, I mostly refer to these things that have taken form somewhere on the Internet. Some theorists (and laypeople) have argued that interactions, relationships, and activities that take place online are not as “real” as those that take place in the physical world around us. However, as a digital native myself, I feel that while these occurrences are not based on physical entities, they certainly do exist with the same essence (to use the term from the *American Heritage Dictionary*) as physical or actual interactions. Jahaerys, the hunter friend mentioned in the introduction, may be a collection of pixels, but there is a real person controlling that character. Does my friendship with him exist? I have never met him face-to-face, never touched him, never heard his voice without the assistance of some piece of technology -- yet we count each other as friends even if our friendship is not built on these tangible things. The tangibility in our friendship – and in any of my relationships with any of the people I have met in this ethnography – is mediated by computers and computer accessories. Our interactions are not simulated by computers with physical cues filtered out, but rather we each bring our own cues to our interaction, and these cues are situated in a digital environment and created natively within the digital ecosystem.

Nancy Baym has written extensively about this phenomenon in her 2010 work on forging personal connections in a digital age. She documents the ways that communication online incorporates other cues such as color of text, symbols, special lexicons, writing conventions such as CAPSLOCK, and even the very mode of communication itself, to add meaning to conversations. Virtual ethnographers have attempted to address this issue in a variety of online spaces, such as MUDs and MOOs (Cherny, 1999; Schaap, 2002), Instant Messaging (Baron, 2004; Merchant, 2001), mailing lists (Bury, 2005; Marcoccia, 2004), and virtual worlds like *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006). I will detail

the findings of these studies later in this work, but what they all have in common is an attempt to discern the ways that community members display alignment, affiliation, and identity in virtual communities. I take much of my approach from these works, including the need to spend time participating in the community rather than observing from the outside. Even if much of the interaction that goes on in these communities is observable from chat logs or screenshots, the motivations and beliefs of the members cannot be understood fully unless the ethnographer interacts with the populations. In many cases, this involves the ethnographer becoming part of the community (if they are not already when they begin the study), which, while it is the primary feature of a participant-observation style ethnography, blurs the line between researcher and subject. Nardi has said of her own work that “In studying *World of Warcraft*, my practice tilted toward the participant end of participant-observation. It would be impossible to penetrate the game without being engaged as a player” (2010:28). Nardi’s description aligns perfectly with my experience as a researcher and a player – especially looking back at the difference in my understanding of the culture at the beginning of the ethnography and at the end, I truly see the difference that my competence made in my ability to understand and engage with the language and the players themselves. When I could not only understand the jargon and behaviors, but also demonstrate them myself, the other players opened up to me and let me in to their worlds. In my experience as an ethnographer, competence is invaluable. This experience is reflected in my presentation of ethnographic data in this dissertation – in the autoethnographic interludes, I write about times when I experienced the very phenomenon myself, and analyze my own reaction to the events taking place. This is designed to highlight the sources of my competence as an ethnographer of the community. Having described the considerations that go into the

ethnographic style of this work, I will next describe the particular methods that I employed during the ethnography to collect the data

2.1.1 Methods and Instruments

The site of study is Azeroth (and Outland and Northrend), the continents that make up the virtual world of the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game, *World of Warcraft*. I played the game on my personal computers – a laptop at the very beginning of my ethnography, and a desktop computer in my apartment for the majority of the time. I purchased the game myself, as well as all of the game’s expansions (with the exception of the first expansion, *The Burning Crusade*, which was a gift to me from one of my in-game friends), and paid a monthly subscription fee of \$14.99 during my time of play.

The data collection was done mostly using a chatlogging function built into the *World of Warcraft* interface. I used several third-party add-ons² during my ethnography to automatically turn on the chatlogging function at the beginning of play. Chatlogging was done by typing `/chatlog` into the chat interface in *World of Warcraft*, which saved all text chat into a .txt file on my computer. Periodically, I copied and saved the chatlogs on an external hard drive as a backup. I also “cleaned” the chatlogs by removing non-interactive information, such as notifications of how much money my character had picked up from corpses. These chatlogs provide a record of textual interaction during the entirety of my time playing and capture many interactions of a large group and even one-on-one interactions that I had with other players. They

² These add-ons are: Cirk’s Chatmanager, LoggerGnome, and WOWScribe. I used different add-ons because periodically one would “break” and the developer would not fix it.

serve as a record of my time adventuring through Azeroth and provide a valuable resource for chat data.

During my ethnography, I periodically kept a journal of my experiences and interactions. While I originally intended to record my experiences on a daily basis, I admit that I was not as vigilant about this as I would have liked to be since much of it was repetitive, but I did note major events. More helpfully, I kept a personal and private online blog where I wrote about events and occurrences that happened in my experiences in *World of Warcraft* and some of my thoughts about researching the game; while this personal blog was not intended for use as an ethnographic resource, I find much value in reviewing how I, as a player, progressed through the world.

An additional source of data which will be extensively used in this work is a series of interviews conducted with players. I interviewed fifteen active players of the game and members of the community. Ten of these players self-identified as heterosexual men, one identified as a gay man, three identified as bisexual women, and one identified as a straight woman. The ages of interview participants ranged from 18 to 42. These interviews were conducted one-on-one over the voice chat program Ventrilo³ and recorded and transcribed. In these interviews, players were able to talk to me about their experiences in the game world, and I was able to ask them questions about their gaming history and behaviors. These interviews provide a viewpoint of gaming practices from other players who have had different experiences than mine, and help me to corroborate my own viewpoints and experiences in the game with those of others. In some cases, which I will detail in later sections, my interviewees had substantially different game-

³ Copyright Flagship Industries, Inc.

playing experiences than I did, which also provided insight into the many ways that players can experience the same game.

Finally, I have some data that capture real-time actions in the game. The chatlogs somewhat capture this, but they only record the textual aspect and no screenshots. I took some recordings of Ventrilo interaction during raids, but again, these recordings only captured the voice chat that was happening and not the on-screen behavior. To be able to observe interaction based around *World of Warcraft* as best as I could, two volunteers were asked to record themselves with video cameras while they played. These recordings were done by two male players who were roommates and played the game together. They used two Flip video cameras to record hour-long gaming sessions. The cameras captured their talk with each other as well as talk occurring on Ventrilo and a view of their computer screens. The participants also sent me chat logs of their recording sessions to supplement the videos. These videos were transcribed using ELAN and used to analyze multimodal behavior in interaction. When they become relevant, I will describe these videos and transcripts in greater detail.

These methods give me four different perspectives on my time as an ethnographer. My field notes, along with my memory of events, represent my own subjective experience; on the other side of that, the interviews I have done with other players offer corroborating or alternative views on the same gameplay experience that I had. The chatlogs provide a rich resource for finding mundane, everyday interactions in the game world, especially in common interactions that happen on a regular basis for every player. The videos, on the other hand, represent a small portion of time captured in intense detail, and show me the scale of complexity that a gaming session may have. Using all four of these sources, I will present a view of how multimodality is deployed in a community of *World of Warcraft* players.

2.2 THE GAME AND THE COMMUNITY

2.2.1 The Game

Until this point, I have not described the game environment of *World of Warcraft* beyond a basic textual narrative. Before embarking on a study of the game, first I must present the game as a means of contextualizing the work.

World of Warcraft is an immense virtual world in a fantasy-style setting. It is classified as a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG), meaning that it is a game that is played online by many players simultaneously. The “massively” in the classification is, in *WoW*'s case, truly massive: the game had ten million active accounts at the beginning of my fieldwork, with its peak at over twelve million in 2010.⁴ The game was released in 2004 and has evolved in the years since with three expansion packs adding new territory and challenges to the gameplay experience. No solid demographics are available on the player base of *World of Warcraft*, although an outdated sample by Yee (2006) indicates that the average player of *World of Warcraft* is a white male in his 20s, although about 21 percent of players in Yee's sample reported to be women.

In the following section, I will provide a general narrative of a typical introduction to the game world. While not all players experience their first time in the game world in the same way, I attempt to make this as general as possible. The purpose of this next section is to situate the reader to the relevant considerations for creating one's presence in the game world, including some initial constructs of “community” that a player encounters.

⁴ <http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?id=2847881>

2.2.1.1 Welcome to Azeroth

To play *World of Warcraft*, the first step is to choose your server. A server is one particular incarnation of the game that houses a certain subset of the playing population to prevent lag issues associated with having millions of people accessing the same server. Servers are divided into four types: “normal” player-versus-environment (PvE) servers, player-versus-player (PvP) servers, roleplaying (RP) servers, and roleplaying player-versus-player (RP-PvP) servers. The main distinction is that on the PvP and RP-PvP servers, players can attack other players at any time, whereas on PvE and RP servers players cannot attack each other except in certain controlled circumstances. RP servers are intended for roleplaying, an immersive game practice in which players create histories and personalities for their characters; however, in reality, roleplaying is a rare occurrence even on RP servers and the only practical difference between RP and PvE servers is that RP servers have guidelines for naming characters. The choice of server for a new player, more often than not, involves joining a server where established friends are already playing. This was the case in my work – I joined Scarlet Crusade, a RP server, where I had two online friends who already played the game.

Once you choose a server, then you arrive at the screen to create your character that will be your vehicle for interacting with the game world (see Figure 1). The character, which is called an “avatar” in most virtual worlds but in *WoW* is called a “toon”, can be one of ten fantasy races. The races include those drawn from recognizable works in the fantasy genre, like two types of elves (Night Elves and Blood Elves), dwarves, gnomes, orcs, trolls, humans, undead, werewolves (called Worgen) and goblins; there are also two races which are specific to *WoW*, the bipedal bovines called Tauren and the hooved alien creatures called Draenei. These races are divided up into two warring factions: the Alliance (Night Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, Humans,

Draenei, and Worgen) and the Horde (Orcs, Trolls, Tauren, Undead, Blood Elves, and Goblins). The Alliance races can communicate amongst themselves but cannot communicate with members of the Horde, and vice versa. The Alliance versus Horde battle is constant fodder for stories inside of the game world, and also the motivator for player-versus-player combat.

After choosing a race, you choose the class that you want to play in the game world. By *class* in *World of Warcraft*, I refer to the ten sets of playstyle traits available, each of which has different abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. The available classes at the time of this ethnography were: warrior, paladin, death knight, hunter, shaman, druid, rogue, warlock, mage, and priest. The class that you pick depends on how you want to play the game. Warriors wear heavy plate armor which slows them down but lets them withstand a lot of damage, while rogues wear light leather and attack from the shadows so they can avoid being damaged. Priests wear cloth robes and can be healers or spell-casting damage-dealers, and druids can be any of the above. Do you want to cast spells to damage your enemies? Choose a mage or a warlock. Do you want to do physical damage using awesome weapons? A rogue, hunter, or the hero class death knight would be a good choice. A player who wants to cast spells that heal a party may be drawn towards the healing abilities of the priest. For tanks, you cannot go wrong with a warrior class. Those players who want more choices pick a hybrid class, like a druid, paladin, or shaman.



Figure 1. The character creation screen in *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade*, taken in March 2008.

Here, I have made Carl, a Dwarf priest.

Once you choose your server, your race, and your class, you can choose to make your toon a male or female, and then you choose from limited customization options available for each race. Giving your character a name is the final step (although a complicated one, as Hagström (2008) has pointed out), and then you are launched into the world. Your toon springs into being just as Parnopaeus the Night Elf hunter did in the introduction to this dissertation, and you are guided through the process of navigating and understanding the virtual world. See Figure 2 for a screenshot of the player's first view of Azeroth. On your screen is the back of the toon's head, and in the distance there are a number of other figures, including a character with a bright yellow exclamation mark over his head. These are non-playable characters, or NPCs. NPCs are created by the game developers to make the game world seem like an inhabited world; they provide quests, sell items, and speak within the game world. The game gives you a tip to go talk to characters with exclamation marks for directions with how to interact with the world – and in

order to “talk”, you, as the player, are instructed to use the mouse to right-click on the NPC when your avatar is standing next to him or her.



Figure 2: The player’s first view of the world of Azeroth. (March 2008.)

Talking to this NPC starts you on a “quest”, or an activity to be done within the game, as shown in Figure 3. In the early stages, these quests are designed to acclimate a new player to the mechanics of the world around them, but as you progress through the game, more difficult quests are accessible. The quests not only introduce the history of Azeroth and main characters in the story of the world, but they also give players the means to acquire the money, items, weapons, and armor which are needed to survive. Quests also give players a direction to travel and an impetus to explore the vast world of Azeroth. Some quests will even require players to team up, for example, to defeat an exceptionally strong dragon terrorizing the village of Lakeshire. (See Rettberg’s (2008) work for an analysis of the ways that quests integrate the player in the game world through narrative and repetition.) After completing quests, you (the player) receive the

money and gear promised, but your toon also receives “experience points”, which are a way of measuring progression through the game. With more experience points, your toon will become stronger and will be able to take on larger monsters. After a certain amount of experience points, your toon will gain a “level” which marks how strong it is in relation to other characters or monsters. A five level difference in opponents can mark the difference between a routine fight and a brush with death. All toons begin the game at level 1, and with an investment of time and effort by the player, your toon may eventually reach the highest level possible in the game, level 85.



Figure 3: A beginner’s quest in *World of Warcraft*. (March 2008)

Along your journey through Azeroth, you might see other characters doing the same things that you are, as I did when I played Parnopaeus and met Skywlker, and as pictured in Figure 4. These other characters are actually other *players* with characters in the realm, and they may be interacted with by talking (typing into the chat box) or gesturing (selecting from a list of

gestures that your character is programmed to make). These players, if they are aligned in the same political faction, may be friendly and offer assistance; alternatively, if they are of the enemy faction, they may attack.



Figure 4: Interacting with another player in the game world using /say. (March 2008)

There are a multitude of things to do in *World of Warcraft* as the character progresses through the game. Questing is just one option; players can also explore the world, socialize with other players in chat channels, defend contested territory from the enemy factions in special player-versus-player battlegrounds, learn how to craft weapons or armor by gathering materials and patterns from the world, and go on intense raids of difficult dungeons with many people for glory and incredible rewards. One of the primary components to any journey through Azeroth is joining a *guild*.

A guild is generally a loose collection of players who have similar interests or playstyle. When you join a guild, you get a number of benefits – a special “guild tag” that appears above

your toon's head identifying you as a member of that guild, a tabard to wear over your armor displaying the guild's colors, access to a "guild bank" where guildmates can donate or withdraw items and gold, and in-game bonuses to your character such as increased run speed and a boost to experience gained. One of the most important parts of being in a guild is belonging to a community, as a guild functions as a gateway to social activities in the game (Williams et al., 2006). Most guilds do events in the game together, such as leveling together, running raids, roleplaying in groups, or joining a PvP battle as a group; even those guilds that do not have group activities still share an in-game chat channel specifically for guild members where players may socialize, ask questions, or give advice. In this work, I focus on members of a particular guild called <SeeD>; however, to say I studied a particular guild or a particular community is not sufficient to understand how these players are situated inside the large *World of Warcraft* community. In the following section, I will describe how the concept of community works in *World of Warcraft* from the standpoint of both a player and a researcher.

2.2.2 The Community

The community under analysis in this work is not a simple construct. Most virtual communities are quite complex, and even the notion of 'community' in online spaces is difficult to grasp. The term "community" has been often overused in the literature on computer-mediated communication, with the result that "virtual community has become synonymous with virtual group" (Blanchard 2008: 325). Some researchers refer to large websites like eBay and Amazon.com as "virtual communities", even though these sites do not allow opportunities for substantive interaction among their members (see boyd 2002, and Kling and Courtright 2003). Watson's (1997) work on an online fan community deals carefully with the construct of

'community' and its problematic nature, stating that "Subjectively, when one looks into a virtual forum, it *feels* like what one knows as a community." (105) Watson points out that the use of the community metaphor for online spaces is problematic because there are different levels of participation in online communities, and unlike physical-world communities, many of the participants may not know each other and some (called 'lurkers') may never been 'seen'. He suggests that some individuals in an online community have no commitment or stake in the community, while others may have high levels of commitment which increase their involvement and thus make them more 'present' members of a community. The stability of a community relies on these present members, who are identified by the "frequency and regularity" of their postings or participation in events (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith 1995: 92). However, issues of authenticity complicate the idea of membership in a community – some, like Rheingold (1993), note that the medium of computer-mediated communication inherently prevents interpersonal identification and judgment based on physical characteristics or behaviors, and when people exploit this, the community construct can be undermined by mistrust. However, as pointed out by Watson, "There is no standard for determining sincerity of communication across all situations. Sincerity then becomes measurable only in a manner specific to its context and by people familiar with that context" (108). An ethnographer familiar with the community can provide the insights and familiarity needed to judge sincerity, and therefore, the community construct applicable in a particular group of people.

In this work, I will continue to use the term "community" to identify one particular subset of the large group of *World of Warcraft* players. The community I refer to is not exactly synonymous with the term "guild" in *World of Warcraft*, as the community of players extends beyond the confines of the guild and, in fact, excludes some members of the guild. To define this

community, I will use both Blanchard's (2008) description of a participant's sense of virtual community (SOVC) as well as Watson's (1997) notion of intimacy.

Blanchard describes three processes that contribute to an individual's sense of virtual community: exchange of support, learning and creating identities, and development and enforcement of norms. Exchange of support can be emotional or informational, and in a community like *World of Warcraft*, can also involve members supporting each other by engaging in collaborative actions. Identity learning and creation in a virtual community exists on both an individual and group level – the community has a sense of identity, and individuals within that group both reinforce and affect the group's identity with their own identities. A community member can learn about other individuals' identities, and in the process display his or her own; this leads to more activity within the group as well as the development of personal relationships (McKenna and Green 2002). A group's identity can lead to the formation of norms, both tacit and explicit, which helps group members identify positively with the group as a whole and reinforces the development and maintenance of a group identity (Postmes & Brunsting 2002).

An essential component that runs through the description of SOVC is intimacy, which is generally defined as how socially close participants feel to each other. Intimacy and support are very similar concepts – by supporting each other in action as well as interaction, a greater degree of intimacy is fostered. A higher degree of intimacy is linked to a higher sense of community; after studying a community of fans of the band Phish, Watson concluded:

...how well an individual from Phish.net is able to commune with others in the community [...] determines the degree of intimacy or quality of commune-ity which that individual experiences through their everyday interactive fan practices via CMC. (1997: 109-110)

He describes three ways that this community developed and maintained intimacy: declaring and abiding by internal values, firming up the borders against outsiders, and legislating behavior outside of the community. These three intimacy-maintaining behaviors are related to SOVC in that they are ways of displaying identity and norms within a community. These behaviors were specific to the Phish.net community that Watson studied, and other communities may see variation in attempts to develop and maintain intimacy.

The community of *World of Warcraft* players that I study is a single community nested inside of a number of larger groups. There is, of course, the player base of *World of Warcraft* which is made up of several million people with varying degrees of involvement in the game community. Not all of these players know each other, and the average player will only encounter a tiny fraction of the player base in their time playing. There is little intimacy involved here, although there is a shared jargon that most of the player base will be familiar with that binds them together linguistically.

Thousands of players are present on a *server*, or single instance of the game. The player base is separated into servers in order to speed up gameplay and not crowd the game's resources due to its large player base. An individual player is more likely to encounter other individuals on the server that they play on, although this may still be a fraction of the server's player base. Social interaction happens fleetingly during quests in areas of the game where other players help each other, or in the public chat channels where goods and services are exchanged and sometimes discussions are held. For most players, much of their interaction comes within their guild.

A guild, as described earlier, is a collective of players who have similar playstyles and goals for their game experience. The guild in my study is called <SeeD>, and is composed of

approximately 70 active members (and many more inactive members) who function as a social unit in the game world. The individual guild members have many different reasons for wanting to be part of this particular guild – they may have a friend already in the guild, or they may have heard about the guild via a recruitment post or from talk on the chat channels, or they may simply like the name of the guild or the colors of the guild tabard – but through participating in guild activities and reading guild-related information, they learn the standards and expectations for being in <SeeD>. The guild has a charter and a set of rules for members to follow, including some restrictions on language such as a ban on “racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive language”. While all of the guild members may not actively play the game with each other, the guild offers a space for players to be social while they are playing the game, and along with the benefits and privileges of that space come rules for interaction. That is, members of the guild are expected to share norms of interaction when they are acting as part of the guild. Much like Watson’s Phish community, the guild declares internal values by having a public charter with stated norms and behaviors, firms up the borders of the community against outsiders by wearing a common tabard and having a guild tag above characters’ heads, and legislates behavior by policing behavior such as actively restricting language use. The guild <SeeD> can be thought of as a community; however, not only are there many inactive members who do not play any longer, but there are also a number of active ‘lurkers’ in the guild who do not actively participate in conversation or events. Some of these lurkers report just liking that that guild is friendly and safe, and others just want the ‘perks’ of belonging to a guild. A few members are friends or family of current members and interact only with the person they already know. This lack of intimacy with these lurkers problematizes the potential confluence of ‘guild’ and ‘community’.

For this reason, the group that I call the “community” and which is the primary focus of this work can be thought of as the “core” of the <SeeD> guild. The core is made up of approximately twenty members, and the membership of the core has changed throughout the course of the study. These members are the most active in the guild and the ones who regularly attend guild events and most closely follow and enforce the norms associated with <SeeD>. The core has fuzzy boundaries, meaning that there are people who participate in guild activities quite often but not as often as other members, as well as former core members who have quit the game or otherwise become less active but who are still in regular contact with other members of the community. The concept of the core of the guild is similar to a *community of practice*. A community of practice, as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), is a group of people who are engaged in a common endeavor by mutual agreement (whether tacit or explicit) and who “come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values – in short, practices” (Eckert 1996:183). The definition of community of practice harkens back to both Blanchard’s sense of virtual community as well as Watson’s description of intimacy.

The core of the guild is made of members who actually play together – they are the ones who attend the ten-person guild raids, which are the primary activity of <SeeD>. Beyond this activity, these members regularly interact with each other in a variety of modes and mediums, sharing support in both action and interaction. They are the ones who enact and enforce the norms of <SeeD>, defining the boundaries of the guild against the rest of the *World of Warcraft* community at large. This boundary becomes very important when it comes to identity, as I will discuss in the second half of this dissertation.

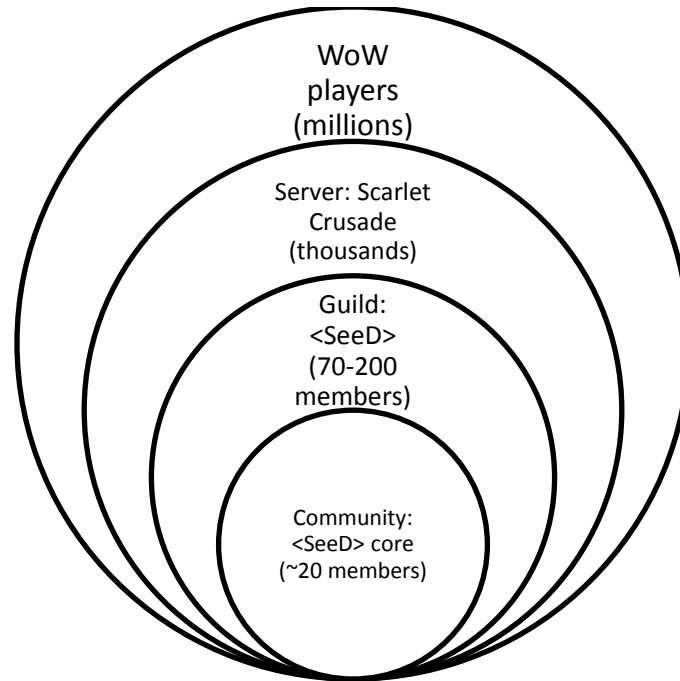


Figure 5: Visualization of nested communities.

I have described a complicated and nested vision of community in *World of Warcraft*, as seen in Figure 5, and shown how theoretical constructs of community apply to the group of study in this work. The purpose of this exercise is to show how the community can be deconstructed, and to illuminate the boundaries and edges of membership in the community. Without the many years of ethnographic observation and participation in *WoW* society, I would not have been able to understand or present this outline. Only by being a member of the guild’s core, and by falling outside of it myself, have I been able to understand how people perceive and navigate these boundaries. Furthermore, understanding this construction of community helps me understand the different tools that players use to interact with each other based on how close they are, or what level of community they share in common. One of the tools that players use to develop and maintain intimacy with group members is the mode of their communication – members of the large *World of Warcraft* population may only communicate via websites and forums outside of the game, while those in the same guild communicate in-game using guild chat channels. Finally,

those in the community of practice, or the core of the guild, communicate via a number of means – textual chat, voice chat, and even in many cases social media (e.g. Facebook) that connects them to each other in so-called “real life”. Social life in *World of Warcraft* is a complex landscape which players navigate every time they play; no analysis of any construct would be complete without understanding how ideas of community function to the player.

By using the multiple methods of analysis, I can show interactions that happen inside of the community – in the guild as a group as well as in the core of the guild as a community of practice. The video data depict interactions among people who are in the core of the guild and who interact with each other and their guildmates in many modes at the same time. I will use these data in the first section of this work to show how multimodal communication functions at a micro level inside of interactions, and how participants use modes to further social goals or to achieve politeness in everyday conversation. The interviews, on the other hand, give a broader view of player understanding, allowing me to understand how participants relate to the various community constructs in *World of Warcraft* and how this impacts their methods of communication. I will use these data in the second half of this work to broaden my analysis outside of an interactional context to observe more global patterns of mode usage and what sorts of factors influence a person’s overall usage of a mode.

Part One: Multimodality in Interaction

3.0 MULTIMODALITY IN INTERACTION: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how modality functions as an interactional and sociolinguistic resource, a primer in the fields of computer-mediated communication and multimodal research is necessary. In this chapter, I will present an overview of the study of modes and multimodal discourse to lay the groundwork for the analyses of data presented in chapters four and five. First, I will present the key terms and concepts used in studies of mode and multimodality as a means of orienting the reader to the ideas and concepts that are of interest for the present study. I will follow this survey of terminology with an overview of studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which are relevant to the analyses of mode, with a particular eye towards studies of virtual worlds. The reason I focus mostly on virtual worlds is because the body of literature on computer-mediated communication is vast, and by narrowing the focus I can access the research that is most relevant to my work on *World of Warcraft*, although insights from those studies of text-based mediums will be included when helpful. Particularly, I will highlight those studies that focus on a particular mode of communication and its nuances. The second part of this chapter will focus on literature that explores multimodality in online spaces, especially virtual worlds. There are not many studies that explicitly address multimodality; however, some studies look at multimodal environments or address multiple modes of communication to answer their research questions, and helpful insights can be gained from their methods and results. From this past work, I will be

able to draw a map of the modes of *World of Warcraft*, showing both the ways they relate to each other and the way that participants use the modes productively in interaction.

3.1 MODE AND MULTIMODALITY: SOME DEFINITIONS

Many theorists differ on their exact definition of ‘mode’, but a common characteristic among these definitions is that a mode is a means of representation of meaning, with regularities and norms (Norris, 2004: 11). However, a mode’s norms and patterns are not set in stone – rather, they socially shaped, as Jewitt (2009) states:

Mode... is understood as an outcome of the cultural shaping of a material. The resources come to display regularities through the ways in which people use them. In other words in a specific context (time and place) modes are shaped by the daily social interaction of people. (23)

Therefore, the definition of ‘mode’ that I am working with in this dissertation is a combination of Jewitt’s and Norris’s, and is as follows: *a mode is a socially and culturally shaped means of representing meaning in communication*. A mode can be verbal, like face-to-face conversation or a telephone call, or it can be written, like a letter or an instant message. A mode is a communicative mode if it can convey information – in this definition, image, color, and gesture can also be conceived of as communicative modes (Jewitt, 2009). In this work, I refer to two types of modes – *linguistic modes*, in which language of some type may be conveyed (e.g. spoken language in speech or textual language in a letter), and *nonlinguistic modes* in which the communication is not based in language (e.g. gesture or color). My focus is on the linguistic modes, and in this work I will describe three primary linguistic modes in *World of Warcraft*:

text-based chat, computer-mediated voice communication, and face-to-face voice communication. These will be detailed more explicitly in Chapter 4.

Mode is distinguished from *medium* in that a medium is the means for distributing messages that contains a set of unified modes each with clearly defined functions (Bezemer and Kress 2009:169). *World of Warcraft*, the game, can be called a medium – it contains many modes inside of it which each have their own function, but the functions of these modes within the *World of Warcraft* medium may differ from the functions of the same modes in other mediums (including other games). The medium is where the social uses of modes are realized, and mediums are multimodal by nature. Multimodality is the co-presence of two or more modes at the same time during an interaction; multimodality may be thought of as a ‘communicational ensemble’ of modes (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001:111). In a multimodal interaction, the modes may not be used simultaneously but they are all available for use at any given time; they may reinforce each other, fulfill complementary roles, or be ordered in a hierarchy (Berglund, 2009). As stated previously, all interactions are arguably multimodal – face-to-face conversations use a combination of spoken language, gesture, and proxemics (body position and distance) to convey meaning; telephone conversations have the verbal talk but also the mediating object of the telephone itself as well as the visual fields of each interlocutor; chat room interactions have not just the textual language to consider, but also the color and font of the text, the names (or handles) of speakers and their profile information, and design and layout of the chat room.

In multimodal interactions, modes function as *semiotic resources*, or in Jewitt’s words, “systems of meaning that realize different functions” (2009: 22). The mode is the system itself, and a mode functions as a semiotic resource within multimodal interaction in a particular medium. A semiotic resource can be conceived as a top-down look at modes – that is,

interlocutors choose from their set of available semiotic resources to convey their intended meaning when interacting with others. Some modes may add different meanings to the language contained within – Goody's (1987) work on written and oral communication in an West African religious community is an example of ways that writing as seen as "less personalized" than spoken language, in that the introduction of a writing system depersonalized social activities which otherwise relied on face-to-face interaction (p. 204). As a contemporary popular example, illustrated by Gershon's (2010) work, breaking up with your partner via text message has an impersonal and distanced connotation when compared to breaking up in face-to-face interaction. In the same way, in *World of Warcraft*, many players report a vast difference in being told that they were doing something wrong in a one-to-one “whisper” text-chat message versus being told the same thing over voice chat which the entire rest of their group can hear. The whisper message is perceived as less threatening, while the voice chat version is seen as being “called out” and is a strong face threat. The whisper text-chat mode and the voice chat mode have different functions, and are used as resources based on the aim of the speaker – if the speaker wants to embarrass their target, voice chat’s public quality will achieve that aim because this type of communication has a more personalized connotation; however, if the speaker wants to be polite and save face with their target, a whisper is the best choice of modes available to achieve that purpose because it allows some social distance between the interlocutors.

I am starting to hit on a problematic portion of the conception of ‘mode’ – that within a mode like text chat, there are different versions of the mode available to be used. One-to-one whispers and one-to-many conversations in a public chat channel are both text chat, and they are in the same mode with similar rules and norms. A whisper and a chat room can be classified as different modes based on the definition of mode, but it is the users’ norms and assumptions

regarding the modes that delineate the distinctions. Gershon (2010) uses the term *media ideologies* to describe the assumptions that circulate around modes of communication, defining it as “the metalanguage that emphasizes the technology or bodies through which we communicate”, which allows analysts to focus on “how people understand both the communicative possibilities and the material limitations of a specific channel, and how they conceive of channels in general” (283). Part of this conceptualization of media ideologies is *remediation*, or the comparison of new media to existing modes of communication in an attempt to make sense of the possibilities of new technologies (287). The media ideologies of expert *World of Warcraft* users are under investigation in this chapter, and I will often make reference to the remediation of the extant modes in *WoW* with the same modes in other mediums. Returning to the example of whispers and chat rooms being classified as different modes, since the users of the text chat mode (and I include myself in this group) lump whispers and chat rooms together even though they have different modal affordances, I am inclined to preserve the users’ media ideologies that cause them to talk about these modes as part of the same unit. To assist with this delineation of varieties of modes into sub-modes, I will appropriate from Gershon’s (2010) definition of media ideologies the widely-used term *channel*. Channel is broadly defined in linguistic, but usually refers to the form that a message takes whether it be oral, written, or manual (Saville-Troike, 1989: 23). Alternately, channel has been used to refer to methods like whispering or shouting of the spoken forms and essays or personal letters of the written forms, and the choice is “usually dependent on distance, or the need for a permanent record” (ibid., 52). Additionally, channel is sometimes linked to sensory organs like visual channels versus aural channels (Constantinou 2005:609). Channel has another sense, that from popular usage, referring to a particular broadcasting station of a television or radio; this has been adopted into computer-mediated

communication, referring to “chat channels” as particular rooms or sub-communities of chat rooms. In *World of Warcraft*, channel is used to refer to the various chat channels with different participants and visibility constraints. Inspired by this wide-ranging use, I adopt the term *channel* to mean a particular instance of a mode which has all of the characteristics of the mode but which may vary by features such as access, participant sets, and visibility. In the spoken face-to-face language mode, channels would include whispers and yells – the purpose of the whisper is to restrict the number of hearers, and the yell is to increase the number of hearers. Thinking of the example interactions in *World of Warcraft* presented at the very beginning of this work, in the text chat mode, channels used included private messages (called whispers or tells) exchanged between myself and Jahaerys about health potions, [Raid] chat where our raid leader gave the entire group instructions, Say, which creates a visual speech bubble that I used to interact successfully with Skywlker to tame my pet Duskstalker, and [General] chat for all players in the entire zone. These four channels (there are many more) were all produced in similar ways by the players (using the chat box in the lower left corner of the screen, by typing using the keyboard, and read after being sent to the chat box), but each had their own participant sets and access and were used for different functions by the players because of the particular characteristics of each channel.

I have introduced four levels media ideologies about modes in this work. To conceptualize the setup of these different terms and their associated referents in the medium of *World of Warcraft*, see Figure 6.

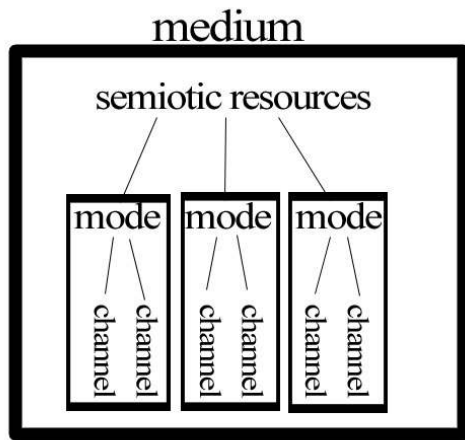


Figure 6: A conceptual scheme for understanding terminology.

In the following section, I will describe how mode (and the associated channels) has been addressed in literature on computer-mediated communication.

3.2 MODE AND CMC

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to the “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring 1996). In the current age, there is an unthinkable large amount of ways to communicate with another human being through a computer, or a computer-like device such as a mobile phone. We can send e-mail, chat in a chatroom, make a post on a Facebook wall, write a blog, and voice chat via Skype or another voice-over-IP program, just as a few examples. All of these modes of communication qualify as objects of study for CMC researchers.

CMC is often characterized as inferior to verbal communication, often in terms of being an “unreal universe” (Stoll 1995:195) that contributes to increases in depression and loneliness

for its users (Kraut et al. 1998:1017). Two particular deficits of CMC that are discussed in early literature are asociality (that is, CMC is lower quality than other forms of communication because of the limits of technology) and antisociality (it has a negative impact on offline communication and relationships). Asociality is assumed because of the lack of non-verbal modes in CMC such as gestures and facial expressions, leading to more distance between interactants (Rutter, 1987). However, the lack of these nonverbal modes (often called “cues” in CMC literature) often leads to the rise of other strategies for communicating the messages carried in these modes, such as creative keyboard use (CAPSLOCK to convey a raised voice, e.g. Mallon and Oppenheim 2002), bending language rules or structures to create a visual style (e.g. Blashki and Nichol, 2005, on 1337 [leet] speak), or using many types of communication to interact via a mediated computer (Walther and Parks, 2002). Walter and Parks (2002) also deconstruct the antisociality assumption of CMC by showing how online and offline relationships blend together – that is, friends online may extend their friendships to offline spaces, and offline friends may interact in online spaces. In this view, CMC consists of another set of modes available for interaction, and these modes all have their own meanings and uses.

Mode usage in CMC is often quite nuanced, and many studies are devoted to the description of the language use in these modes. Baron (2004, 2005) has studied the discourse structure of instant messaging and e-mail, for example, finding that the synchronic characterization of the mode itself has an effect on message length and composition style. In synchronous modes like instant messaging, messages tended to be shorter and use more acronyms and abbreviations; however, in asynchronous modes such as e-mail, messages tended to be structured (including a greeting and a closing) and contain fewer short forms. In a more thorough study of asynchronous modes, Marcoccia (2004) studied the conversational dynamics

of three online mailing lists, showing that the asynchronous nature of the mailing list mode affected the nature of the conversations. He showed that initiating messages on a topic have a "lifetime", or a period of time during which they can relevantly be replied to. For instance, if a user replied to a message that was posted two weeks ago, the topic might be considered "dead"; however, responding within the first day of a message being posted would be considered an acceptable span of time for relevance. He concluded that the displacement and gap in messages in mailing lists *belong* to the conversational dynamics and do not actually disrupt the flow of talk.

Other linguistic cues may be used in online discourse to add intimacy or personalization to text-only encounters. Rheingold discusses the use of "emotes", or narrated actions, as a way to add context and flavor to chat interactions (1993: 153), and set apart with a different linguistic style (typically third person narration rather than first) and are used to indicate mood or intention (182). Similar conventions were noted by Lynn Cherny while studying MUDs and MOOs (1999). According to Rheingold, who cites Elizabeth Reid (1991), these additional rules and means of creating cues in online environments make a "culture" out of an online space.

In studying the culture of *World of Warcraft* and the additional cues in the modes of the game, I found that the character limit and temporal constraints of the *World of Warcraft* chat box (a synchronous mode like a chat room or instant messenger) resulted in predictable message chunking by syntactic and semantic features of an utterance (Collister, 2008). I have also described the effect of the spatial nature of the chat box on language use, specifically on the introduction and use of two deictic forms resembling arrows (^ and <-->) that point to their referent (Collister, 2012). Olson (2009), in a study that is particularly relevant to my ethnography, described the usage of one particular mode in *World of Warcraft* communities:

Ventrilo. Ventrilo is a third-party voice chat platform used by many *World of Warcraft* players. According to Olson, Ventrilo is primarily used as a tactical resource, allowing for quick communication during intense gaming situations like raiding or player-versus-player battles. In these situations, typing out utterances in chat takes time and, more importantly, renders the keyboard useless for controlling the character. In order to allow the keyboard to remain in use for controlling the character, players use Ventrilo (or other similar voice chat platforms) to talk quickly to one another. This usage of voice chat is also documented by Nardi (2010) in *World of Warcraft* as well as Taylor (2006) in *Everquest*.

By this point, it is becoming clear that modes and CMC are not as simple as studying one mode in one community, because many modes are available simultaneously in any given medium. Jones (2004) describes this simplistic study of mode as “conveniently avoiding” the study of the environment and context in which communication takes place, leaving readers with the idea that conversation takes place in a “virtual vacuum” (20-21). It is necessary, in the words of Jones and many others, to challenge the assumption that one mode is all that matters. Even in my work, I have evolved in my view of what constitutes “communication” in *World of Warcraft*. When I began my work in 2007, and up until my first written document (2008), I focused solely on the chat box and what took place there. However, as a player, it rapidly became clear to me that chat was not the whole story, and there was a much larger context that needed to be accounted for in my work. My very first raid and my introduction to Ventrilo was my first clue, and the intricate usage of text and voice that players (myself included) demonstrated day after day only reaffirmed the need to reformulate my own position. I was already starting to think like a scholar of multimodality – in 2008, I described the influence of “the interface” on text chat, describing how a sudden flurry of visual activity on screen may slow down textual conversation

and result in larger gaps between utterances. In 2010 (publication in 2012), I wrote about the visual nature of the screen and the way text chat responds to the layout and design of the chat box, and how sometimes the uses of deictic lexical items could be infelicitous when they referred to the wrong linguistic mode. Finally, in 2011, I described a phenomenon called *mode-switching* and began the work that would lead to this dissertation. This progression of this ethnographic work started as consideration of a single mode while being unfortunately ignorant of the existence of others, and has moved to its current state as a description of a multiplex of modal possibilities available inside of a virtual world. In the following section, I will lay the foundation for my analysis by describing work by other scholars on the ensemble of modes available as semiotic resources to users of CMC mediums.

3.3 MULTIMODALITY IN CMC

Multimodality, as a field of study, approaches interaction as consisting of more than simply language, and extends the social interpretation of language and its meanings to a range of communication methods. That is, multimodal scholars see image, writing, gesture, gaze, and posture as integral parts of the communication process, on the same level as spoken language itself. However, the mode itself does not drive the meaning-making process; rather, it is the users who shape the modes and their usage according to the demands of the community as well as their own extant media ideologies. As Jewitt (2004) wrote, “the meaning of a text is realized by people’s engagement with both the medium of dissemination and the representational affordances (whether social or material) of the modes that are used” (184). That is, how people use the modes is determined by cultural norms and the possibilities available in the mode. In this

section, I will describe previous research that shows how mode usage is shaped by users' preferences and the technological affordances of the mode, which will set up a subsequent discussion of the mode use patterns specific to *World of Warcraft* users.

In modally dense environments (meaning those situations with many modes available and in use), each mode develops a complex range of uses in response to the situation and context of the utterance. Norris (2004) describes the concept of modal density as the complexity and multiplicity of modes in an interaction. Either one mode can be very complex or an interaction can be made up of a number of modes that intertwine to create a high modal density (80). Modal density is an extremely important concept for those who study virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* because of the sheer number of modes that players use in interaction. A “noob”, such as I was when I started playing my hunter Parnopaeus, may be easily overwhelmed by the modes and the lack of understanding of their complexity and interrelatedness. I encountered this very thing when I used the incorrect chat channels to attempt to communicate with other players. Untangling the uses of the various chat channels was the key to a successful interaction. Very advanced players, on the other hand, know all of the rules and operate in extremely modally dense environments with apparent ease; however, when broken down, the mode usage is quite complex and points to interaction and identity rules in the community. Additionally, managing the modal density by partitioning modes into various uses is one of the key skills for *World of Warcraft* players to master to become competent gamers.

With this in mind, I will provide here an overview of studies that have dealt with multimodality in CMC environments. According to Thurlow et al. (2004:18), CMC is inherently multimodal, because of the visual nature of text lending itself to layout and design features that also carry meaning, as well as the incorporation of images. Much of the work on multimodality

in CMC centered around advertisements and webpages (Kress, 2010: 139). This type of work focuses on design and the incorporation of images and text, informed by work such as Unsworth and Cleirigh's (2009) study of the synergy of language and image in textbooks as well as Stöckl's (2004) analysis of the multimodality of printed advertisements. These ideas are deployed for social and identity analyses in Jones's (2009) description of technological "sites of display" which allow language and images to come together as a demonstration of identity in online spaces. Jones studied an online photo-sharing website, and argued that a user's display of photos of their body in online communities is a type of social interaction in which the body is made into a description of one's identity (125). In this way, the visual mode is used to augment the textual mode.

An example of a study that mentions multimodality but which does not center around the interplay of text and image is Thomas's (2006) study of a community of fanfiction authors online. These authors used both a forum and instant messenger to create the content for their website. Thomas's participants described the way they used instant messenger to role-play their stories, which were then edited into a more traditional story format before being posted on the forums and, eventually, published on a website. The writers used three different modes, all of them text-based but each with its own format and interactional rules, to create their final text output. Thomas's study is interesting to the study of multimodality because it shows a clear-cut case in which the mode does not define the language, but rather the users are the ones who define how to use the mode although they could clearly indicate where their use departed from broader media ideologies of each mode. For example, while studies of instant messenger such as Baron (2004) and Merchant (2001) have discussed the use of "short forms" like acronyms and emoticons in the instant messaging style, Thomas's authors did not use these forms in instant

messaging because their purpose of using instant messenger was to write a story, not to chat. It is clear from Thomas's work that there are no pre-defined rules for language use in the instant message mode – rather, these rules vary from community to community based on the needs and uses of the mode in question. Similar work was done by Bury (2005), who studied a group of women who were fans of the actor David Duchovny and who corresponded via a variety of mediums: e-mail lists, personal e-mail, chat rooms, forums, and websites. She studied the interactional features of these women from a sociological standpoint, but linguistic features were also quite salient. She found that typo correction in all modes of interaction was a form of linguistic capital for these women -- by knowing to correct their errors, they felt that they distinguished themselves from other communities that used these same modes but who used non-standard language forms. Bury also showed that one mode in particular – the mailing list -- tended to have a higher usage of hedging and self-effacing humor as a politeness strategy. She noted that this was because mailing lists are a form of asynchronous communication which allowed the writers more time to compose their messages and to make use of available politeness strategies.

The ethnographic approach has been applied to more modally dense communities, including digital worlds like Second Life and online multiplayer games. These environments are graphic-based, meaning there are visual modes available in addition to linguistic ones. Players can make avatars to represent themselves in the digital world, and the appearance of the avatar can send a message about the identity of the player (or about what their identity is not, e.g. Boellstorff, 2008, on “skins” in Second Life). Furthermore, according to Taylor (2006), these communities extend beyond the digital world that they inhabit. Outside of a game like *Everquest*, players use websites, forums, e-mail, chat, and voice-over-IP options to communicate. The

ethnographer must take into account these other forms of communication, as Nardi did in her ethnography of *World of Warcraft* (2010). Nardi's work is an ethnography of the player experience in the game world, and describes the different ways that players congregate and enjoy the gaming experience. Her work is much about the interaction of the player and the content of the game and how players make meaning of their in-game experience through the pursuit of objects and objectives in the game world. She describes the practice of playing *World of Warcraft* and other games similar to it as a *mangle* – a “heterogeneous mix of practices, economic conditions, and technologies that shape experience” (72). In her description, a mangle refers to a type of system of coordinating practices and experiences that feed into each other and result in the creation and maintenance of community norms. Taylor's (2006) work on Everquest describes another instance of a mangle in the behaviors and aesthetic experiences of the “hardcore” player, and that ways that a virtual world can “bleed” into the offline world. Taylor's work shows how a gamer identity is made up of many different modes and actions in those modes – and that being a hardcore player involves more than play of the game in question but rather a multitude of practices and demonstrations of knowledge and identity. Taylor's point is taken up by Banks and Martey (2012) in a study that explicitly mentions multimodality. They describe the “network of personas”, including material and immaterial modes of communication, which players of online games use to construct their identities in virtual worlds. In Banks and Martey's view, a player's self is a combination of representations of identity across mediums, both online and offline, and these representations can occur in many modes, not just the communicative ones.

Ensslin (2012) takes a different approach to analyzing multimodality in virtual worlds, describing the ways that players are embedded in the virtual worlds of games through the design

of the game's modes. She uses the term 'cybernetic feedback loop' to refer to the phenomenon in which players are linked both to the hardware and software of their computers through interfaces like keyboards and headsets, but they are also linked to their avatars in the virtual world. This enables "a complex, quasi-self-regulatory interplay of stimuli and responses" in which an event happening to the avatar requires a response both in the virtual game and in the physical world with the controls and interfaces (125). She further describes how video games are designed to take advantage of the multimodal possibilities of communication, integrating meaning into other modes such as iconographic pictures and character facial expressions (117), character point of view (123), landscape and terrain (132), and color (134); furthermore, she connects all of these modes in a discussion about racism in the game *Black and White 2*, where ideologies are encoded in a character's visual appearance of age and skin color (red, in this case), as well as avatar movements and non-standard language variety (140). Ensslin's work focuses primarily on the design and the interface of the game itself and prioritizes the technology over the user experience, while Banks and Martey's work describes what players *do* with the modal possibilities made available to them by the technology.

Boellstorf's (2008) ethnography of *Second Life* describes the relationships and multimodal interactions among participants, and how social interaction functions in that particular online space. He describes how players use different avatar skins to display identity (145), and how the layout of a player-designed area of the game affects the kind of interaction that goes on there (104). His work is a combination of the design and user-oriented approaches, showing how the users of *Second Life* created a system for social interaction using the available modes, and how that system was disrupted with a change to the interface. In a section that explicitly targets multimodality, he discusses the debate in *Second Life* about incorporating voice

chat into the interface (113-116). To many residents, adding voice chat “damage[d] a border between virtual and actual” because of the media ideologies associated with the voice chat mode clashed with those they had developed and maintained for chat in *Second Life*. His subjects fought against the increase in available modes in *Second Life* because they feared that it would upset the established norms of interaction in the community.

All of this prior work on mode usage in online communities points to one common theme: the users – that is, the members of the community themselves – define how to use the modes through the act of using them in mundane, everyday uses. Rulebooks may be made are made regarding the existence of different modes, but those rules are in constant flux as users continuously engage with the medium. No one told Thomas’s fanfiction authors how to use instant messaging to best write their stories; rather, they used the modes that were most appropriate to the tasks they were trying to accomplish, and through their constant use of the modes they created the norms and expectations for those modes in their community. A familiarity with broad patterns of use of modes is an essential starting point for inquiry into community-based usage; there may be some similarities in the uses of the same mode in different communities and users rely on remediation as a way to make sense of new mediums, but every community will have its own rules specific to the community’s needs and composition. To access these media ideologies in play, it is imperative for an ethnographer not only to become familiar with the patterns in similar groups, but also to spend time participating and observing the community to discern the ways that specific communities may appropriate modes in different ways. These differences in mode usage are one of the linguistic features that distinguishes online communities from each other. While observing as an outsider may allow the ethnographer to avoid affecting her own data, direct participation in the community has benefits for the

ethnographer as well. By interacting with members of the community, the ethnographer can come to know and follow the same rules as the participants that she is studying, allowing her deeper access to the patterns that participants regularly engage with themselves. .

With this insight in mind, I will proceed in the next chapter to analyze the uses of the modes of *World of Warcraft*. The game is extremely modally dense, and understanding the context and constraints of mode usage is important for gaining insight into the ways that players use the modes for social purposes. To perform this analysis, I will rely on participants' descriptions of their patterns of mode usage as well as my own experience as an ethnographer learning the rules myself.

4.0 THE MODES OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Here are just some of the metapragmatic utterances about media ideologies I encountered during my time as an ethnographer of *World of Warcraft*:

(1) Jahaerys whispers: let's chat in Vent

Skakavaz whispers: why?

Jahaerys whispers: lol typing is so slow

(2) [Raid] Jeremiah: I guess the Vent server is down so I'm gonna have to type all the instructions.

[Raid] Jeremiah: I know it's annoying, but you'll all have to deal.

(3) [Guild] Riella: I can't talk in vent, have no mic.

[Guild] Riella: but I can listen

(4) Chromus whispers: thanks for explaining that to me

Skakavaz whispers: no prob!

Chromus whispers: i didnt want to ask on vent and have everybody laugh at my noobishness

(5) [Raid] Theon: If you have specific questions about your assignments, please whisper me instead of distracting everybody on Vent.

All of these sentiments seemed very commonplace to me at the time they were written, and will seem familiar to any *World of Warcraft* player. By unpacking the assumptions embedded in these utterances, all of them reveal the media ideologies surrounding the different modes being used in regular game play in this community. The aim of this chapter is to illuminate the uses and ideologies of three common linguistic modes: text chat, voice chat (Ventrilo), and face-to-face talk.

To accomplish this task, I will use four sources: utterances made by players in the normal course of gameplay, interview discussions, ethnographic and autoethnographic observations, and data of language-in-use from videos.

4.1 TEXT CHAT

I begin with the most complicated of the modes, but also the one most familiar to CMC researchers: text chat. By “text chat”, I refer to the mode of communication that involves typing words into a chat box. In *World of Warcraft*, the standard interface has the text chat window in the lower left-hand corner of the screen, and users can read any chat happening there at any time but must press the Enter key to open the input space for their talk.



Figure 7: A (slightly modified) *World of Warcraft* screenshot. The chat box appears in the lower left hand corner.

Because of its visual-spatial nature, written communication carries with it many qualities that make it a good mode for organizing communication (Goody 1987, 276). In *World of Warcraft*, this is the case with text chat; because of the ability to designate colors and tags to chat happening in different channels with different interlocutors, text chat offers the most options for directing one's talk to a certain set of players. In Figure 7, two channels are being used, [Guild] chat and a private message or 'whisper', indicated in the chat box by both color and a channel tag. [Guild] chat, a channel visible to all members of the guild who are currently online, appears in green and has the tag [Guild] in front of it. Whispers, which are visible only to the sender and receiver of the message, are indicated in pink text and the preface "(Character name) whispers:". The channels frequently used in this community are listed below, along with the default color of the channel's text and the access limitations.

[Guild] – bright green text – visible to guild members currently online

[Officer] – dark green text – visible only to those of high rank in the guild

[Party] – blue text – visible to those in a small, temporary, task-oriented group

[Raid] – orange text – visible to those in a large, temporary, raid group

[General] – white text – visible to all players in the same in-game zone

[LocalDefense] – white text – visible to all players in the same in-game zone

[Trade] – white text – visible to all players in major cities

Say – white text plus speech bubble – visible to those in the immediate area

Yell – red text plus speech bubble – visible to those in the area (larger range than Say)

Whisper – pink text – visible only to sender and receiver of a message

The channels listed here are encoded, meaning the channels themselves and their rules for use are embedded in the game software itself. Members of the community were also present in user-defined channels, which were created by players for various uses. Some of these channels that I encountered included [SeeDhealz], a channel for the guild's healers, [SeeDlings], for friends or former members, [ALE], a roleplayers' channel, and [TheHotTub], a channel used by three in-game friends to chat amongst each other away privately. The *WoW* interface allowed the customization of the color of these channels' text; when joining one of these channels, I made it a priority to change the color of these channels to differentiate them visibly from other channels. For example, I made [SeeDhealz] a bright yellow color, because this channel often included important instructions or information and I wanted the channel to attract my attention even in the midst of battle.

Colors of the chat channels are a particularly important element of the design of the chat system. While the tag at the beginning of the channel helps to identify the particular channel in which talk is occurring, the colors are, to many players, one of the most important cues for the

channel of their talk. In a conversation on the guild's forums, one player, Hohenheim, described the annoyance he feels when creating a new character and trying to interact before customizing the colors, "It drives me nuts when I get on an alt and all the channels are the wrong colors." Another player, Laira, agreed, saying "God help me if a chat channel changes colors." Color is sometimes conceived of as a mode itself (e.g. Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002), but it can also be an aspect of a mode such as design or layout and part of a mode's usage as a semiotic resource (Lim Fei 2004:53). In this case, the color of the chat channel is an aspect of the channel itself, used as a means to signal which channel is being used and the associated participants of that channel.

With all of these options for text chat channels available, how do players choose what channel to put their text into? Sindoni (2011) discussed the role of text chat in video chat conversations and found that participants frequently used the text chat function to convey secrets or very personal information that they either did not want to have overheard by others in the environment or that they felt was a face threat of some sort. This is very similar to the ways that *World of Warcraft* players use their chat channels for different purposes. Chen (2009) described a setup in the guild he studied where each class of characters had their own channel available to discuss tactics. This was a way to streamline raids and keep certain types of talk restricted to only the pertinent audiences – for example, the entire raid group did not need to know how the hunter characters were dividing up their responsibilities, since only the hunters had to coordinate that particular aspect of the fight. Reading extraneous talk in [Raid] chat, according to Chen, would have been confusing for all of the participants since it would have resulted in a flurry of conversations in the same channel that were not all relevant to every person. <SeeD> had channels that functioned in a similar way. One example is the [SeeDhealz] channel – it was

created by a member of the guild for the healers to use to discuss problems and strategies pertinent only to raid healers.

The participant sets of the various chat channels was not only used to include relevant parties, but to exclude other players that speakers did not want to be privy to their talk. This was the function of channels like [Officer] chat, which was for the officers of the guild only. In this channel, the officers – or those who were in charge of the guild and had assigned responsibilities – would discuss things like guild policies or disciplinary measures for misbehaving guild members. Often, the officers would not want the misbehaving member to be present for the discussion of how to mete out punishment; similarly, they would not want all of the guild to be able to watch the decision-making process. (Nardi also mentions this practice in her ethnography of *World of Warcraft* (2010:74).) Player-created chat channels were often used this way as well. In [TheHotTub], a channel created for conversation between Jahaerys, Natholis, and myself, conversations often centered around other players and what they could do to improve their play. One example of this type of interaction occurred in the second videotaped gaming session: Natholis reported to me that he observed one of the healers not following the strategy correctly during a raid, and used [TheHotTub] to do so. He chose this channel because he was not in a position to tell the healers what to do – he was not an officer or even a healer himself – but he felt that this was important enough to bring up to me, as I was healing and giving instructions to the healers during this particular raid. He used [TheHotTub] because it was in a safe space where he could report the incorrect behavior without ‘calling out’ the player in question, which would have been considered impolite or a face threat.

Finally, one of the uses of text chat that combines both the visual aspects of the mode and the participant sets in the channels is the practice of reciting songs or chants from popular culture in public chat channels. Many guild members engaged in this behavior at some point, and it was considered one of the trademark behaviors of the members of the guild <SeeD>. One of the favorite recitations was the chant from the cartoon *Captain Planet and the Planetears*, shown in Table 1, which occurred in the public chat channel [General] chat (although it sometimes occurred in [LocalDefense]). The chat channels were created by the game designers and all players are automatically subscribed to these channels, which results in a large population of viewers of the channel. [General] is intended for general chat with no specific topic, while [LocalDefense] is intended for warnings about invading enemy players and organizing a team to battle against them. In practice, [General] chat was usually used for questions or to solicit help with a task in a particular zone, and [LocalDefense] was almost never used by players. Therefore, the ritual Captain Planet summon that occurred in the [General] channel broke the user-created rules for the channel. The purpose of this behavior was not only to demonstrate arcane knowledge of topic popular to this type of community, but also, in Jahaerys's words, "We'd do it during raids, in the public channels, because sometimes people take raiding so seriously. It was just to lighten things up." Many others in the channel, particularly those from outside of the guild <SeeD>, found this practice annoying, as demonstrated in Example 1, mostly because such antics would distract players from the raid and their duties that they were trying to perform. The reason that they distract players is because the characteristics of the text chat mode include not only the typed words and the color of the text, but it also has a spatial aspect to it – that is, text chat scrolls through the chat box, displacing other chat and taking up space on the screen. Seeing the words scrolling by on the screen and taking up space in the chat box that

might have been used by raid-specific chat channels (such as [SeeDhealz]), was annoying to those who were not participating in this practice and trying to engage in a more serious raid.

Line #	Begin Time	Matt Speech	Ska Vent	Other Vent 1	Chat	Chat 2
241.	05:22.9					[General] Jahaerys: EARTH
243.	05:25.7				[General] XXX: FIRE!	
244.	05:27.0					[General] Erzio: EARTH
246.	05:29.1					[General] Mystero: WATER
247.	05:31.0			Sonic: general was so quiet		
248.	05:31.6	[laugh]				
249.	05:31.8				[General] Rufus: HEART!	
251.	05:33.5					[General] Erzio: HEART
253.	05:34.8				[General] Mystero: HEART	
255.	05:36.9	Not very good but				
256.	05:37.4					
257.	05:37.5		until `now`			
259.	05:38.4				[General] Deidora: STFU	
261.	05:39.8					[General] Helas: >.<
262.	05:39.8	[laugh] STFU lookit				

263.	05:40.6				[General] Yubba: rofl	
267.	05:44.8	Gosh you guys are causing a riot on general chat				
269.	05:46.4			Rufus: everyone says zoh my god SeeD's raiding today		
270.	05:47.4					[General] Snowpy: HRAET
271.	05:47.4				[General] Sonic: ^ FAIL	

Table 1: Guild members use text chat to annoy other participants in the channel.

The game designers attempted to impose certain purposes on other channels besides [General] and [LocalDefense] – such as [Trade] chat which is ostensibly for business transactions, but which is actually used more for chatting, questioning, and spamming because of the large amount of participants automatically subscribed to the channel. Because there are so many viewers of this channel, some players who thrive on causing trouble (or *trolls*, see Phillips 2012) intentionally post inflammatory language or opinions in [Trade] chat to provoke a reaction. [Trade] chat also functions as a space to display one’s wit with fast comebacks or amusing jokes, which will be viewed by a large subset of the population.

In summary, text chat is used in this community for social purposes related to the affordances of the mode. The parameters of text chat allow for a number of channels dedicated to different purposes based on the population of the channel, and the colored text allows players to easily identify which channel they are using and, consequently, which participant sets they are interacting with. Players knew the participant sets in their channels and used them appropriately

– except for the times when they erred. In the errors of the medium, and the attention given to the channel usage, we can further show the relevant characteristics of the mode (Scollon 1998: 68).

In *World of Warcraft* culture, there is a popular humorous event called a “mistell”, which is often the source of great hilarity. A mistell occurs when a player sends a message to the wrong channel. This can occur because the player is not paying attention to the chat box because they are distracted, or when they accidentally type a keystroke to change the channel at the last moment. Mistells can be innocuous, such as sending a simple message like “hi” or “yes” to the wrong player in a whisper window, or they can be embarrassing or potentially harmful. Players love to recount stories of embarrassing mistells that are sexual in nature, and I have heard both from avid erotic roleplayers who inadvertently sent an erotic message to their raid leader when they meant it to go to their roleplay partner (resulting in embarrassment), but also from people who have ended relationships with other players because a mistell revealed that their partner was engaging in sexual conversations with another person.

What do mistells reveal about the modal affordances of text chat? Laira, a very popular player who used many chat channels, noted that a chat channel being the wrong color (due to an interface reset or another error) “is the biggest cause of my horrible sexual mistypes ever”. The role of color is important to understanding which chat channel is in play – another player, Costanz, said, “Officer chat is always purple, I DO NOT want to confuse Guild and Officer chat.” Costanz did not want to confuse Officer and Guild chat because sending a message meant only for officers to the entire guild often has disastrous consequences. One incident from my ethnography in particular illustrates this – an officer (not Costanz, but another officer) was describing why he was prohibiting a player from attending raids for a week because he was being a “loot whore”, and then added that this player “has a stupid and distracting voice”. The officer

inadvertently sent the addition to [Guild] chat, where the player in question was logged in and could read it. The player was embarrassed about his voice and never spoke in Ventrilo again, and eventually left the guild presumably due to his embarrassment. The officer did not intend that player to see that message, but the mistell put his words in the wrong channel where there was a different set of participants. This is the same phenomenon that occurs in the sexual mistells – the utterance (often a whisper) is inadvertently sent to the wrong player, or in some cases to more public chat channels like [Guild] chat, which results in unintended viewers of the talk.

In summary, the many channels available in the text chat mode offer players a variety of ways to communicate with different audiences. Some of these audiences are pre-made, such as [General] and [Guild] chats, but others can be created by players themselves for a particular purpose (for example, [SeeDhealz] for the guild's healers, or [TheHotTub] for a group of friends). While the text chat mode seems to offer great flexibility for communication, it also provides many opportunities for miscommunication with negative consequences. Managing the many channels of the text chat mode is one of the earliest, and most fundamental, skills that a *World of Warcraft* player must acquire. The next mode that players encounter is usually voice chat.

4.2 VOICE CHAT

Voice chat is primarily conducted using third party software that runs independently of the game; there is voice chat capability built into *World of Warcraft*, which was introduced in 2008, four years after the game was released, but players generally avoid the *WoW* voice chat. Reasons for this avoidance mostly center around the lag created in the game by the voice chat function –

voice chat increases the processing load of the game, which slows down the action in the rest of the game environment. In my experience, players also avoid the in-game voice chat function because they are accustomed to using one of the many third-party programs and do not want to learn how to use a new system.

To use voice chat, players usually had a headset consisting of headphones and a microphone, and a third party platform installed on their computer. <SeeD>'s preferred software was Ventrilo, but members of the community had experience with other programs like Mumble and Teamspeak. These programs have several things in common: separation of users into different channels to house different conversations, the ability to set up special passwords to protect the channels from outsiders, and a push-to-talk (PTT) key. The PTT key is a special key on the keyboard that the player presses and holds when he or she wishes to speak to voice chat. The PTT key allows users to control the verbal utterances that they wish to broadcast to the voice chat channel, which allows players to engage in other conversations with those physically co-present with them (see the following section) or to listen to music loudly without disturbing the other players present on voice chat. The PTT key was an important consideration for most players – most of the players I spoke with used a key on the left side of their keyboard so that their right hand would be free to use the mouse. As a player, I am the only exception to this that I know of – I assigned my PTT key to be the PAUSE button, which is on the upper right corner of my keyboard, because it was not used by any other function in *World of Warcraft*. I have often found this setup to be inconvenient, but my multiple attempts to assign a different key to be my PTT key have resulted in great frustration and even some inadvertent Ventrilo broadcasts.

Some *World of Warcraft* players also used Skype, but for a different purpose. Skype does not have a PTT key enabled, but rather allows players to communicate directly without having to

hold down a key. One player I interviewed, Chromus, often used Skype while engaging in player-versus-player combat on a team with his friends – PvP combat often involves quick responses and rapid strategizing, so being able to talk openly while using all of the keyboard made Skype a good choice for him in that particular situation. Another player, Laira, reported using Skype in conjunction with Ventrilo to communicate in two different voice chat channels – an openly broadcasting one with her boyfriend, and a PTT-controlled channel with her raid team members. I, personally, used Skype primarily when playing the game with my boyfriend only, and never in conjunction with Ventrilo because the feedback noise of hearing my own voice broadcast on Ventrilo through my boyfriend’s headset was annoying. We would turn off Skype and turn on Ventrilo when it was time to raid.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will primarily refer to Ventrilo (which is shortened to ‘Vent’) and the usage of this software in the community. If I wish to talk about the use of another program, I will name it specifically, but the default voice chat platform I refer to from here on is Ventrilo. I categorize voice chat as a mode itself, with Ventrilo and the various other platforms as channels within the mode. They all involve similar processes – talking into a headset and listening through headphones – with variations based on the software being specifically used. The PTT key is a primary component of the mode, but not a necessary one as evidenced by the use of Skype. The lack of PTT functionality is what makes Skype used in very different situations than other voice chat platforms.

As hinted at already at various points in this work, Ventrilo is primarily used for raiding situations. My first encounter with Ventrilo was during my first raid, when the raid leader informed me ahead of time that Ventrilo was required for the raid; most players I interviewed concurred, saying that their first uses of Ventrilo was during raids. Vent allows for quick

discussion of strategy in the heat of battle when the keyboard is being used to move the character and activate abilities. In these high-action situations, players report that it takes too long to type a chat message, and in that time a player may miss a necessary movement or action that may cause their death (or someone else's). By using Ventrilo, only one key needs to be depressed in order to communicate, and that key does not interfere with the operation of the rest of the *WoW* interface – a player can hold down their PTT key and simultaneously click the mouse or press other keyboard keys to continue their in-game actions. Olson (2009) has shown the ways that raid teams improve performance when communicating over Ventrilo versus in text chat, due to the modal affordances of each mode. He asserts that it is “apparent from the experiments that voice communication is much more efficient than text communication, since the latter often involves a distraction both to send and receive, and is usually brought to the attention of the receiving player much later than if the same message had been transmitted via voice” (4).

That being said, during raids Ventrilo was not just used for talking about strategy but also for socializing. Olson described the interaction that occurred between bosses, when there was often downtime while dead players were resurrected or loot was distributed. Players used these moments to chat with each other or make jokes, as Olson called “loose banter to relieve the stress of battle” (3). I observed a similar phenomenon in my study – players typically engaged in socialization only between battles, and restricted their talk during battles to strategy and associated talk. “Loose banter” topics could range anywhere from what everyone was eating for dinner, to memorable game events, and even to the nightly ‘H-Hour’ run by a player named Rufus who facilitated discussion of topics of a more ‘adult’ nature. This type of interaction added to congenial feelings and intimacy in the group, and often close friendships formed during raid interactions (see Nardi 2010:120 for a similar discussion).

The people who spoke most on Ventrilo were the raid leader and any class leaders who were present in the raid (e.g. the healing leader, who would give assignments to healers). However, anyone could speak at any time, and sometimes restrictions had to be created and enforced to stop “unnecessary chatter” on Vent during raids, particularly during boss fights when loose banter was not desirable. Players cited this behavior as the most aberrant and annoying uses of Ventrilo, and use of Vent for socialization was encouraged outside of raids. Players who were online at the same time and who wanted to chat while doing separate things in the game would often request that their friends get on Vent with them. Talking via voice chat while engaging in other activities is described by Geerts (2006) in his study on interactive television as “more natural and direct”, making following events on screen easier. Talking on Ventrilo in *World of Warcraft* was similar, as players often found it easier to voice chat, but in this community was usually reserved for players who counted themselves as friends already. Players did not typically voice chat with just anybody, especially not for purely social reasons. Talking on Ventrilo for the first time could be awkward because using one’s voice suddenly incorporates an aspect of ‘real life’ into gameplay – which is what Boellstorff’s *Second Life* community fought against, claiming that using voices disrupted the immersive environment of the game. Most players reported in their interviews that hearing someone’s voice could communicate other things about that player’s identity – whether they were male or female, American or Australian or British or a non-native English speaker, and sometimes their relative age – and therefore lessen the anonymity that many players of the game (and users of the Internet in general) are used to (Schneider 2009). This is not news to anyone, of course, especially sociolinguists who have been showing the ways that our language varieties demonstrate identity or group membership for decades, but this was a very real concern for *World of Warcraft* players. Letting

someone hear your voice was a way of forging a bond with them, adding authenticity to the interaction, and it was a signal of friendship – and chatting on Vent with friends using one’s voice was a way of maintaining the connection.

Using Ventrilo during raids was a requirement, but for the average raider, talking on Vent was optional. Most raid guidelines only required that players needed to be able to listen to instructions given. Outside of raids, inviting a player to socialize on Ventrilo for the first time was often indicative of a desire to expand a game-based friendship. To illustrate, I will present a short autoethnographic episode from my early gaming experience that reveals some of the concerns navigated by users of voice chat.

4.2.1 **Interlude: Ventrilo as “getting personal”.**

It is April of 2008, in the middle of the Burning Crusade expansion of *World of Warcraft*, and I am playing Skakavaz, my level 68 holy paladin. I have discovered that I am in high demand because I am playing a character that is a rare commodity: a healer. Healers are essential for group play in *World of Warcraft* because they have spells and abilities which mend and protect their party, allowing the other characters to focus on killing enemies. Healing is a difficult and thankless job, and as such, healer characters are quite rare. In my travels in Azeroth, I have discovered that being a competent healer means that I never have trouble finding a group of people to venture into difficult dungeons for special gear, gold, and experience points.

While I am in the large city of Shattrath gathering supplies, I notice a level 70 player named Paetrik advertising in [Trade] chat. He is looking for a healer to join him in his group to through the Shadow Labyrinth dungeon multiple times to attempt to get a particular piece of gear. I decide to take advantage of the opportunity and whisper Paetrik to say I’ll join his group.

He invites me, and along with his friend Mork and two other players, we enter the Shadow Labyrinth. It is my first time here, but they do not mind; they seem well-informed about the best strategies for defeating the bosses in this dungeon and take the time to explain the strategies to me. During the course of the evening, I learn more about Paetrik and Mork – they are both level 70 (the maximum attainable level in the game at the time) and trying to get better gear so they could perform better in raids. In other words, they are the first ‘hardcore’ players that I had ever encountered.

We run through Shadow Labyrinth five times that night, and I find myself enjoying the experience even though we never manage to get Paetrik’s gear. Finally, midnight comes and I need to go to bed. Paetrik asks if he can add me to his friends list – he is a warrior tank, another rare commodity in the game, and tanks and healers often make quick friends because both are in such short supply. I take it as a compliment that such a competent player has thought highly enough of me to want to play with me again.

Over the course of the next couple of weeks, Paetrik sent me private messages every time I logged in, asking about the gear and experience I’ve gained and sharing his stories from his raids. Whenever he needed a healer for a dungeon, he invited me. Two weeks after I met Paetrik, I reached level 70 with his help. Inspired by Paetrik’s stories from raids, I went on my very first raid with my in-game friend Averik. We went with a friend-of-a-friend’s guild, where I was introduced to raiding culture -- and Ventrilo.

The day after my first raid, Paetrik whispers me as he usually did, and asks if I want to do a particularly difficult dungeon (called a ‘heroic’) with him and Mork. While we chat waiting for

Mork to log in to begin the heroic, I tell Paetrik about my raiding experience and show him the new pair of gloves I obtained. Finally, Mork logs in and Paetrik whispers me:

Paetrik whispers: hey would you get on vent with us while we do this heroic? it'd be easier to talk about strats

I am unsure of what to do with this request. I have only used Ventrilo once, and although I had bought my own headset to make it easier to interact on Vent during raids, I find myself still feeling a bit shy about talking. I have heard stories about how women are treated badly in this game, and I myself have even experienced random sexual advances and disparaging remarks about my playing ability just because my avatar is female. With a female avatar there is always the possibility of the player being male, but if I speak on Ventrilo my female voice will mark me immediately as female, and I am reluctant to open myself up to the possibility of being harassed during a raid by people I do not know. However, this is my in-game friend Paetrik, who had been nice and encouraging to me, and I think I feel safe enough to talk with him without worrying that he would harass me in some way.

You whisper to Paetrik: okay, hold on, let me open it.

Paetrik gives me the login information, and I open Ventrilo and log in to his server. I am automatically placed in the channel where he and Mork are chatting away. Immediately, I hear a male voice say, "Hi Ska." It is Paetrik, and he sounds normal enough.

"Hi guys," I say back.

Silence.

Is my microphone not working? I check the setup quickly, and make sure that I am pressing the right PTT key. "Can you guys hear me?" I ask.

The next thing I hear is laughter, and another male voice – this one speaking a non-native variety of English -- says, “You were right!” That voice belongs to Mork, who I find out later is a native Mandarin speaker.

“About what?” I ask.

“About you being a girl,” Paetrik says.

This makes me feel uncomfortable. Does my status as “a girl” really matter? I had been in so many dungeons with both Paetrik and Mork, and I had proven my competence. I worry that I am about to be subjected to some kind of sexual advance.

“Yeah,” Mork says before I can say anything, “you see so many dudes in this game pretend to be girls. They lie to you and that’s not cool.”

“It’s always nice to know if you’re dealing with someone who’s really who they say they are,” Paetrik adds quickly.

“Well, I’m a girl.” I feel defensive. “Is that a problem?”

“Nope,” Paetrik replies. “You’re a good healer, that’s what matters. But Mork was saying you were too good to be a girl, but we’ve been friends for a long time now and you never corrected me when I said ‘she’.”

(Many months later, I find out that this isn’t the whole truth – that Mork had actually *bet* Paetrik that I wasn’t a woman, because of Paetrik’s track record of befriending ‘women’ online who were later revealed to be men.)

They never say it explicitly, but this conversation is a mark of friendship – in order to really become friends with someone, to go beyond just a *WoW* friend in the game, you need to share something about your ‘real-life’ self, or something about who you are outside of the game. It is a case of seeking authenticity, or as Paetrik put it, finding out if someone is “really who they

say they are”. In this case, finding out my gender and hearing my voice was that part of my real-life self that opened a friendship that could, and did, extend beyond *World of Warcraft*.

4.2.2 Private binds

Ventrilo was mostly used for public talk for a specific group of people. Whether it was raid instructions or socialization with friends, players knew who was present in their Vent channel. However, within most voice chat platforms, there is the ability to set up what the community called ‘private binds’, or a special key to press in order to broadcast your talk to one other player only and not the general public. In Ventrilo, private binds were difficult to set up, and few people used them, which reinforced the preference to use other modes for directed talk. To talk one-on-one with voice while using Ventrilo, most participants (including Laira) either preferred to run another program concurrently, such as Skype, or switched to a different mode altogether (e.g. whispers in text chat). When private binds were used, they were often a source of confusion, and some players used them to intentionally confuse another player. In his interview, Kovax told a story about a friend’s Ventrilo server and how she used private binds for her own amusement.

Kovax: [This girl], whenever I was in her Vent, she'd have bindings for people, and she would macro them to her keyboard for the bindings, and she would always have a macro for people and she would never just talk, like to people like out in the open in general, like in the group. She would always comment to them personally, and they would never know it, and so they would talk out in the open like it was as if she talked out in the open. But they don't know, and so she would make them look stupid and she

thought that was funny, but a lot of the time it was just annoying because it'd be over something serious we're trying to deal with and she would just be playing around.

In Mumble, another voice chat platform, players could set up options to have many different private binds, some broadcasting only to one other player and some binds broadcasting to subsets of players. Officers of guilds would often use this functionality to be able to talk directly to officers over voice chat. However, this function proved problematic, especially in Mumble, because like Ventrilo, there was not an indication of what audience talk was directed to. One player, Laira, spoke at length about her experiences in another guild that used Mumble. She described what she referred to as ‘mistells’ in voice chat:

Laira: [...] you can't tell in Mumble if there's private binds or if there's not private binds [...] so: there would be a lot of miscommunications and sometimes like the officers would just have these really raunchy conversations about like just random things. And my boyfriend didn't really pay attention and one of our officers really didn't pay attention so I would make a really raunchy comment in Officer chat as to not offend the general raiding population. And then like my boyfriend would like say something else that would just make me look like the WORST PERSON ever. [...] A good example is we had a raiding shaman and he was an officer and he got like a new trinket and he was just like “it does so many things, I could do so many things with it”, and I was like "You could do a lot of things with a vibrator too it probably does a lot of things as well!" and he was just like "Shut up I would never use a vibrator." and I was like

"Sure but lots of women use vibrators." And we went back and forth for like ten minutes about it and I was trying to get him to hurry up to the next boss. And um [my boyfriend] doesn't realize that we're having this conversation back and forth [using private binds] [...] and he goes [serious voice] "Wow Laira, I need you both to stop talking about your vibrators and just hurry up and get into the raid right now." And um it was really awkward.

Because of issues like this, Laira said, many players preferred using whispers in text chat because it was easier to see what channel of the mode was being used to avoid embarrassing mishaps.

The communicative issues with private binds were prohibitive enough to reduce the use of that channel for most players. The modal affordances of Mumble (and, to a greater degree, Ventrilo) did not allow for easy one-to-one communication as a separate channel within the mode – whereas the colors of text chat made distinguishing among channels very easy for users. Ventrilo's interface had a potential solution to this problem with an optional sound effect that occurred when pressing one's PTT button (a buzzing noise like the press of a walkie-talkie button), which alerted the speaker that their channel was open and broadcasting. However, it was not possible using the normal Ventrilo interface to set up a separate sound for individual private binds, so the sound effect was the same no matter which PTT key one pressed to activate which channel.

The modal affordances of the voice chat mode made it so that most users regularly used only one channel of this mode – the public broadcast to all users in the channel. This restricted

the usage of Ventrilo in the community to whatever participant set was available at the given time in the channel and did not allow for easy use of multiple channels of voice chat.

4.2.3 Ghosting

Another little-used feature of voice chat was a practice called ‘ghosting’. Ghosting referred to the ability to inhabit two rooms in Ventrilo at once – in one room, you would have the ability to speak and listen, and in another room, you would only be able to listen. I encountered this practice only three times during my ethnography, and each time it was remarked upon unfavorably by all those present.

Two of the three times that I was witness to ghosting, it was with a pair of members of a raid group who wanted to talk privately amongst themselves while also being able to listen to raid instructions. These users would leave ghosts in the main raid channel and go to another channel by themselves. This allowed them to hear raid instructions via their ghosts, but be able to converse normally using Ventrilo in a different channel where the rest of the raid could not hear them. This practice was problematic because to the other users of Ventrilo outside of that channel, the icons of the subset of players would light up whenever they talked to each other – so everyone could see that these other people were talking to each other but not to them. Leaders of the raid group did not like this practice because talking amongst themselves so visibly could distract from the raid leader talking, or their chat in Ventrilo could distract this small group from performing their raid duties. Nardi referred to raids as ‘enclosed spaces’, set off from the rest of gameplay, where the enclosed space ‘unambiguously identified, in the context of guild raids, a player’s closest partners’ (119). If two players were only listening but not participating in the talk of their closest partners, it created a subgroup which could be problematic to the workings of the

whole team. Other raid members did not like this practice because it was assumed that these players were talking behind the backs of everyone else present, perhaps making unfavorable comments or complaining about other members. Talking about other players was a common occurrence in *World of Warcraft* culture, “to blow off steam” as Kovax said in his interview, but it was usually reserved for private chat channels or whispers (or, as I will discuss in the next section, face-to-face talk). When the icons of players were lighting up in Ventrilo, it was a visual display of the fact that two people were holding their own conversation and it could be about the other members of the raid team. This inevitably roused suspicion, which could lead to the destabilization of a team or entire organization (see e.g. Carley & Prietula 2009).

The other instance of ghosting that I observed during my time was when I was participating in a raid with another guild called <House of Dwarves>. I was not a regular member of this raid group and was asked by an in-game friend to join, so I was not familiar with all of the practices of the guild. When I logged in to Ventrilo, I saw several rooms with non-raid members in them, presumably other guild members who were doing other things in the game besides raiding. In particular, I saw one channel called “Roleplaying Channel” with three players in it and a ghost of one of the raid members. I asked my friend, and she informed me that the ghost in the channel was an officer of the <House of Dwarves> guild. We had the following conversation:

Skakavaz whispers: why do they do that?

Lulu whispers: they're policing the channels, making sure ppl aren't plotting things or making the guild look bad

Skakavaz whispers: is that something they do all the time?

Lulu whispers: yeah, i don't like it, it makes me feel like they're homeland security or something. most ppl never want

to talk in vent if it's not a raid bc they don't want to be spied on.

Nardi calls voice chat “free expression”, meaning that it was “completely outside any means of official discipline” by the *World of Warcraft* game masters (154). Players expect their talk on Ventrilo to be something outside of the game, existing in two distinct spheres connected only by their own practices. This is the reason, I expect, that players resisted ghosting as a type of ‘spying’ behavior – because they wanted to avoid the imposition of discipline for their talk in a supposedly non-regulated sphere.

Ghosting is a practice that is avoided by most *World of Warcraft* members. Although on the surface it seems to be a useful ability, half-participating in a conversation – that is, to hear but not to speak – is seen as eavesdropping, which is problematic to many members. Similarly, being able to see two players conversing but not to be able to access the talk is unsettling for participants. Players like to know and be able to access all of the participants in a conversation, and to have full access to the talk – or they do not want to see it at all.

4.3 FACE-TO-FACE TALK

The final linguistic mode that I will cover is not one that is always available to every player of the game: face-to-face talk (F2F). In this particular instance, I will refer to the F2F mode as occurring between players of *World of Warcraft* primarily – that is, I will not discuss F2F talk occurring between a player and a non-player of the game, e.g. a parent or sibling who talks with a player during gameplay. When I refer to F2F talk in the community, I mean talk that is

happening in physical space – not mediated by a computer in any way – between members of the community who are playing the game together.

Since *World of Warcraft* is a social game, many players engage in play in groups. These groups are friends from ‘real life’ who play together as an additional aspect of their friendship. Some play with family (Nardi and Harris 2006), roommates, friends or significant others (Erkenbrack 2011), some engage in play in Internet cafes (Jonsson 2010, Sjoblom 2008, Nardi 2010), and still others have *World of Warcraft* groups that form at the workplace (Ducheneaut et al. 2007). When these groups form, the F2F mode of communication is added to the already-existing text chat and Ventrilo. F2F does not replace either of these modes of communication, but rather adds to them an additional layer of interaction where new possibilities are available. There is only one channel of the F2F mode – although in other discussions of ‘channel’ in speech, researchers refer to whispering and yelling as channels, in these *World of Warcraft* groups players have other modes to utilize if they want to change the participant set. For example, in a group of three players, if Player A wishes to say something to Player B and exclude Player C from overhearing, Player A might choose to verbally whisper in Player B’s ear; however, in a modally dense environment like *World of Warcraft*, there is a text-chat private message (helpfully called a ‘whisper’) which would facilitate the exchange between Player A and Player B without the physical display of verbally whispering (which might cause suspicion akin to the ghosting phenomenon in Ventrilo).

The use of the F2F mode is illustrated in the video data, which I collected specifically for observing F2F communication. The participants, Owen and Matt (who play the characters Jahaerys and Natholis), were college roommates who played *World of Warcraft* together. In fact, for Jahaerys, playing *World of Warcraft* alone was “boring” because he was so used to playing

with his friend and having that extra social interaction that he felt something was missing when he played alone. They volunteered to record two one-hour sessions of *World of Warcraft* play, and in the second session they included a third player, Owen's cousin Blake, who was also a member of the guild and a regular member of the group who had joined Owen and Matt for a raid night.

In these videos, the F2F talk functioned like a user-created chat channel: the players who were co-present used the F2F mode to engage in talk appropriate for that particular environment. Especially in the raid video, the three participants – all playing damage-dealing characters, or DPS – discussed DPS-specific strategies, and mocked the playing ability of other players who caused them inconvenience. They also discussed topics related to their physical environment, such as the food and beverages they were consuming and the cat who lived in the house and left her fur everywhere. However, the ease of talking in the F2F mode, which did not disrupt any keyboard function at all, allowed for socialization about various topics during gameplay without disruption. For instance, Blake goes on a long rant about Leonardo DiCaprio's acting and several movies that he has seen recently, all during a long boss fight where such talk would have been difficult or detrimental to raid performance.

One of the difficulties reported with the F2F mode is using it in conjunction with Ventrilo. Jahaerys often muted the sound on Ventrilo of those who were co-present with him, but that this caused confusion about whether Natholis was talking to him or on Ventrilo. Sometimes, this confusion caused Ventrilo-based mistakes similar to those occurring with private binds and public channels on voice chat. Sometimes talk in the F2F mode would be inadvertently broadcast on Ventrilo to an unintended audience, which could have humorous or adverse consequences. In

his interview, Hohenheim recalled an instance of inadvertent broadcast of the F2F mode that resulted in public embarrassment:

Hohenheim: and {Natholis} said something goofy about the guy being twelve but he said it in Vent instead of in raid chat

LBC: Yeah that's the one

Um: the way that I have it that it happened was he and {Darius} were in the same room and while {Darius} was talking on Ventrilo {Natholis} said it in the background?

Hohenheim: right yeah

LBC: you were actually there for that right?

Hohenheim: Yeah, cause I remember the guy he sounded like he was twelve years old and perhaps Australian or something

LBC: Can you describe what happened?

Hohenheim: I remember a lot of very embarrassed people trying to figure out whether they needed to apologize and making things a little worse.

I think I think if I remember that right the guy was a little embarrassed but not deeply offended?

and everybody was kind of looking to apologize over it

F2F being heard over Ventrilo was such a common occurrence that it even appeared in one of the rules of the "Beer Run", a raid drinking game that some members of the guild played. Walter, a member of the group, described the rules this way:

Walter: some of the rules of the game specifically to talking included:

If you heard a spouse talking in the background and could identify the

person, they drink. If you talked irl [in real life] and vent at the same time, drink.

Those were two of the rules because a lot of people played with their spouses and we'd get cross talk.

F2F is an easily accessed mode for communication, but not a very versatile one. The participant set is small and there are few options available for changing or altering participant sets. Furthermore, the similarities between this mode and the voice chat mode could result in talk being broadcast inadvertently to the wrong audience. Because of this problem, I believe that Ventrilo usage decreases when players are playing in a co-present group and engaging in F2F talk. Testing this hypothesis would require observation of players in multiple settings, both on their own and in a group, which is outside the scope of the current work.

4.4 CONCLUSION

In this section, I have described the three linguistic modes used in *World of Warcraft*, as well as the channels that are used within each mode. Figure 8 shows a semiotic resource map of the modes of *World of Warcraft* and the channels that I have discussed, parsed to show how each channel fits in to the mode to align with the terminology map in Figure 6.

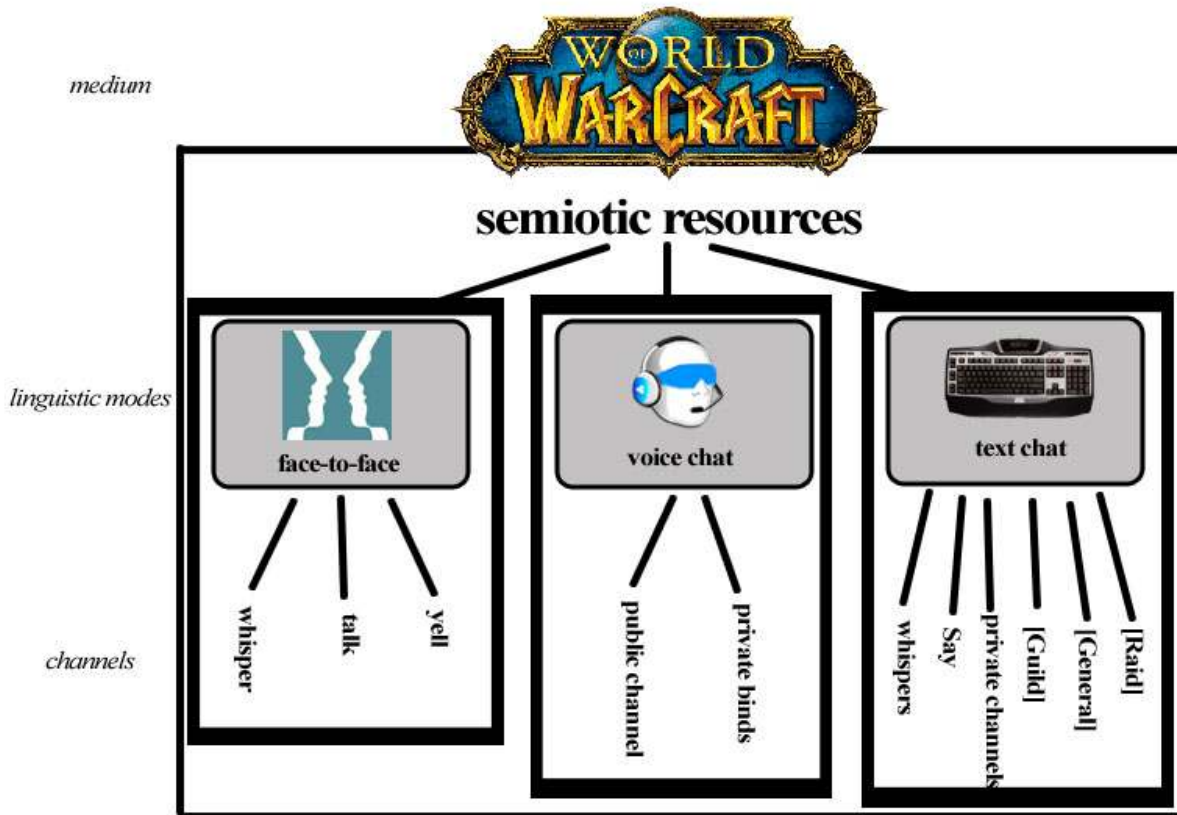


Figure 8: A semiotic map of the modes of *World of Warcraft*. (Note: Due to space limitations, not all chat channels are included in the text chat mode, only representative channels.)

In this section, I have also set out some of the modal affordances of each mode and channel, including benefits and drawbacks for interaction. Table 2 shows a summary of all of the linguistic modes in use and their characteristics. Each mode has its own characteristics that make it useful in some ways and problematic in others, and by knowing these modal affordances and the social rules surrounding the modes, players can navigate the multimodal landscape of *World of Warcraft*.

<i>Mode</i>	<i>channels</i>	<i>properties</i>	<i>benefits</i>	<i>drawbacks</i>	<i>uses</i>
text chat	many, user created, standard/default, global, private	color, channel tag, username	channel recognition, easy creation	keyboard use affects game control, time of message composition	participant-directed talk, public discourse displays
voice chat	public, private binds	voice quality, push-to-talk key for broadcasting, different rooms	communication without disrupting game interface, personal connection	not many available/accessible participant sets	strategizing in raids, authenticating identity, relationship maintenance
face-to-face	one, based on co-presence	voice quality, no mediation	communication without disrupting game interface, participation sets limited by co-presence	intersection of voice with Ventrilo, limitation of participants by physical presence	participant-directed talk, safe space, physical-world reference

Table 2: Modes, channels, and characteristics.

Having set out the modes, their characteristics, and their uses, in the following chapter I will turn to ways that the modes interact with each other. Specifically, I will focus on the use of modes within interactions and the reasons for players to switch between modes. This process of mode-switching shows the ways that participants use modes for social goals in the community.

5.0 MODE-SWITCHING

Having set out the qualities and usage of each of the three linguistic modes, now I turn to a discussion of how speakers use all of the modes together as part of regular interaction. Primarily, I will be observing a process called *mode-switching*, a term borrowed from Sindoni (2011), and which I define as the quasi-synchronous use of two or more linguistic modes. This definition includes one speaker who switches between spoken and written modes in a single interaction. In Kress's (2010:159) words, mode-switching is akin to "orchestrating a multimodal ensemble", or taking advantage of the available modes. Mode-switching usually occurs in highly modally dense situations, which is, according to Norris (2004: 80), a situation in which many modes interplay and speakers are giving attention to all of the modes. A virtual world like *World of Warcraft*, particularly in hardcore gaming environments like a raid, is an ideal place to observe mode-switching.

Mode-switching had been addressed by other researchers. Baynham (1993) studied a mode-switching phenomenon with multilingual speakers code-switching when moving between conversation and discussion of written texts. The texts in Baynham's study were frequently written in many languages, and the language of the text affected which language the speakers used – that is, they switched languages when referring to the text or conversing amongst themselves. In her examples, the speakers were simultaneously negotiating different languages as well as different modes of communication. In a similar study with a different focus, Goody

(1987) examined the impact of literacy on the ways that organizers of an Islamic group in West Africa used three different languages for different types of interactions. He found that the organizers used the same written script for the different languages, but similar patterns of language use occurred for the different topics being written down. Furthermore, in Goody's study, the organizers chose to write down such things as lists, transactions, and dates, which fit into the modal affordances of written communication as a tool for organizing information. Sindoni (2011) described mode-switching in digital environments with an eye towards participation in talk, specifically looking at the reasons for alternating use of voice and text chat by users of Skype. She found interlocutors who were conversing via Skype's video chat option would utilize the text chat feature (which acts somewhat like an instant message) to convey certain types of information, usually sensitive information that they did not want to be overheard. Her primary example was a teenage girl who was video chatting with a boy who she had a crush on – the girl used the text chat option in Skype to admit her attraction to the boy, even though the rest of their conversation had occurred using their voices transmitted using the webcams on their computers. When asked by the interviewer, the girl said that she used text chat for her confession because it was “safer”; that is, she was less likely to be overheard by her parents in the other room.

When thinking about modalities in online environments such as Sindoni's Skype study as well as online gaming, a useful idea is that of *presence*. Jones (2004), in describing the phenomenon of “presence” online, relates the idea of *social presence* to Goffman's *social situation*, stating that it is “an environment of *mutual monitoring possibilities*, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are present, and similarly find them accessible to him”. Jones suggests that social presence online affords

users “different sets of mutual monitoring possibilities”, which in turn have “different ways in which [technologies] allow us to be *present* to one another and to be aware of other peoples’ *presence*” (p. 23). Sindoni’s teenage girl was well aware of the presence of others who could overhear her utterances during her video chat, which was why she chose to use text chat as her modality for her love confession, since only she and her intended hearer were present in that mode. One way that technologies affect presence is discussed by Norris (2004: 22), who uses the notion of *anwesenheit* to capture the idea that people being co-present in a mode may not have their interlocutors as their main focus – the focus may be on a shared activity, for example. This idea of *presence*, specifically *anwesenheit*, is very important to a modally dense social space like *World of Warcraft* because players have many options for where they want to be socially present in the game world, and the management of these different modes is a method for demonstrating communicative competence (Hymes, 1986) in this particular community.

Communication in the *World of Warcraft* community is polyfocal, which is not exactly the same as multitasking. Polyfocality, according to Scollon et al. (1999), is when a participant’s focus skips along multiple “attentional tracks”, which sometimes intertwine and sometimes do not. That is, the components of an interaction may come from many different things at once – talk, action onscreen, gesture, and textual chat – but each of these modes may not constitute an entire different thread at once. Rather, they may combine into a multimodal ensemble comprising a multimodal interaction. The intertwining of these attentional tracks is what allows mode-switching to occur.

5.1 MODE-SWITCHING AS VARIETY-CHANGING

In previous work, I have set out the relationship of mode-switching to other types of variety-changing such as code-switching and style-shifting (2011). Here, I will paraphrase this previous work as a way to connect ideas about mode-switching with observed patterns of variety-changing in the literature. In my previous work, I argued that while mode-switching bears some similarities to these other types of variety-changing, it has important differences that set it apart as neither code-switching nor style-shifting, but as another type of variety-changing altogether.

There are four major similarities that suggest that mode-switching should be included as a type of variety changing: linguistic skill involved by speakers, modes as linguistic resources to be used in conversation, modes carrying meaning in discourse, and the usage patterns of modes.

First, code-switching is described as a strategy employed by skilled bilinguals, and by code-switching appropriately, speakers demonstrate their identity as skilled bilinguals (Winford 2003). Mode-switching functions in a similar way; it is employed in this community by skilled players who have mastered the set of rules for the modes. These rules include the practical rules like how to access each of the modes (hitting the Enter key to type in the chat box, or using a push-to-talk key in Ventrilo), but also the social rules for the modes including the type of language used in each and the appropriate situations for using each of the modes.

Second, Heller (1992) suggests that code-switching is a way for people to manage linguistic resources, and is part of the range of practices that people use to establish social goals. In the previous chapter, I have described how a range of modes are available in the virtual world of *World of Warcraft* depending on the nature of the situation. With all of these modes available, speakers develop strategies for managing their interactions in all of these environments. As a

linguistic resource, modes may be managed in a similar way to the management of linguistic codes, leading to the phenomenon of mode-switching.

Third, Gumperz (1982) suggests that speakers do not use language simply because of situational factors, but rather because they have many linguistic choices to exploit in order to convey intentional meaning. In this, Gumperz says, code-switching is a type of discourse strategy, which spawned a number of investigations into discourse-related codeswitching (e.g. Auer 1984). Myers-Scotton (1993) proposed a markedness model of code-switching, distinguishing between unmarked codes (which are more frequent) and marked codes (those that are less frequent); furthermore, she asserts that using a marked code conveys additional information about the utterance which is linked to the code itself. Woolard (2004: 80) suggests that the most useful application of the markedness model is as an activity of the interactants rather than as an actual property of the code – that is, the additional information conveyed by a code is negotiated by interlocutors in interaction. In this, interlocutors have some volition over their choice of code usage; some codes may be unmarked in certain situation, and the choice to use a marked code may be a strategic move on the part of the speaker to impart extra meaning onto the utterance. These ideas are relevant in informing the analysis of mode-switching in the *World of Warcraft* community. Similar to code-switching, speakers have a range of modes available in multimodal environments; they can choose which mode to use to carry their linguistic information. however, the markedness of modes is not the same all the time in the game community, which affects the reasons for choosing certain modes over others. Certain modes are privileged in certain situations, such as Ventrilo for raid situations as described in previous chapters.

Fourth, a thread of discussion in the code-switching literature relates to the difference

between situational and metaphorical code-switching, which was first introduced by Blom and Gumperz (1972). Situational code-switching is tied to changes in the conversational situation, and in fact the code-switch is usually caused by them. The idea of situational code-switching can be applied to situational mode-switching, when speakers change modes due to a change in their environment – for example, when entering a raid, players are asked by their raid leader to log in to Ventrilo. Metaphorical code-switching does not need to follow a situational change in the conversation; rather speakers use the switching of codes to add meaning to their utterance by using their knowledge of the social meaning of the codes. Auer (1995: 120) proposed a list of motivations for metaphorical code-switching, including: reported speech, change of participant constellation, side-comments, reiterations, change of activity type, topic shift, language play or shift of key, and topicalization. Many of these types of metaphorical code-switching also apply to mode-switching, especially participant constellation and topic shift as demonstrated by Sindoni (2011) and which I will demonstrate in this chapter.

Switching languages, dialects, or varieties in interaction imparts language-related meanings onto utterances; however, switching modes or mediums may not necessarily change the actual language variety being used, but instead does other social work. One of the most important uses of mode-switching, I argue, is changing the participation structure of the interaction. That is, when a player of *World of Warcraft* chooses to speak over Ventrilo, he or she is communicating only to those hearers who are currently logged in to that particular Ventrilo channel; when a player types in a certain chat channel, they are typing to be read by the occupants of the chat channel. This is one of Auer's types of metaphorical code-switching (a change in participant constellation), and, in my analysis, is the most salient motivation for mode-

switching in this game environment. With this goal in mind, I move on to observations of mode-switching from *World of Warcraft* and players' perceptions of their use of modes.

5.2 MOTIVATIONS FOR MODE-SWITCHING

During the interviews, I made sure to ask participants questions about their preferences for modes. One question I asked often was “Is there ever a situation where you would prefer to talk to someone by chat rather than over Ventrilo?” Most participants seemed to think this question was deceptively obvious, which reveals how ‘natural’ mode usage seems to members of the community. Overall, there are two primary motivations for mode-switching for players: modal affordance and audience targeting.

5.2.1 Modal Affordance

Modal affordance, according to Kress (1993), is what is possible to express and represent easily in a mode. I have discussed modal affordances of the three major linguistic modes in previous sections, and these come in to play in the choices that speakers make about which modes they will use to communicate.

Primarily, modal affordance comes into play when deciding to use text chat or voice chat when both are being deployed at the same time. It is difficult to speak a URL or web address for a website that players might be sharing (unless it has a simple name) – these would instead be copied and pasted into text chat. Players might be talking on Ventrilo, and often one would say “I’ll copy the link in chat” to direct their interlocutor’s attention to the chat box. When possible,


players might even use the infrequently-used instant messaging function of Ventrilo to send each other private chat messages containing URLs or links.

Another time when text chat was preferred for its modal affordances is in the sharing of names of other players or items. Some player names are notoriously difficult to spell or contain non-English characters, and text chat is the perfect way to convey the spelling of these names. As an example, an in-game friend once said on Ventrilo that she needed an alchemist character to make her some potions, and I offered my warrior character – an alt that I do not play very often – who had a lot of materials for potion-making. The moment I uttered the name of the warrior, [zɔtʃkə], she immediately asked me to spell his name in [Guild] chat for her: Szocske. “Oh,” she said on Ventrilo, “I always thought that was said ‘sockie’.” Other examples of this include finding a person to fill an empty spot in a raid group -- when a friend wants to go, the raid member may say, “My friend wants to go, can you invite him? I’ll type his name in raid chat.” In both the cases of sending links and names by chat, players explicitly address the modal affordances of text.

In a similar vein, photos and videos were often posted on the guild’s web-based forums because of its modal affordances. Images cannot be shared inside of *World of Warcraft*, but they can be linked to or posted on the forums for players to view later. In Figure 9, an image of such a thread on the forums is shown. A player had promised to share photos of kittens as an apology for being late for a raid, and his guildmate had created a thread on the forums to remind him of his promise. The guild’s forums included a thread for posting pictures of pets, screenshots or art from the game itself, Warcraft-related YouTube videos, and even a thread where players posted screencaptures of amusing conversations from in-game chat. Additionally, as shown in Figure 10, links to strategy videos for raids were often posted on the guild’s forums where raid members

could access the videos at their convenience to review the fights and learn the mechanics; often, this was referred to as “doing your homework” before a raid night. The asynchronous mode was useful in these cases because players would be able to access the photos or videos when they were not playing the game. The asynchronous nature of web-based forums provide the most useful modal affordances for this type of content sharing. Players do not always explicitly address these modal affordances, but most guilds have websites specifically for the purpose of sharing information and content that is not easily done in the game’s interface. The asynchronous nature of a forum or a website allows a guild to have a “tangible presence” online (as <SeeD>’s guild website said at one point), where members of the guild and those interested in joining can find information and get a sense of what the guild is about.

SeeD Forums (Edit Page)



Please note: Our forums use the same login as the main site. Please make sure that you have registered (WoW main character name please) with the main SeeD site before using the forums.

Show/Hide Header

Welcome Skakavaz


Your last visit was: July 31, 2012, 7:02 pm
[Show new topics since your last visit](#)
[Edit your forum options](#)
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Forum » General » General Forums » This is the thread where B... is supposed to be posting kitten pictures

Pages: [1] [Reply](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS feed](#) | [Sticky](#) | [Close](#)

Author	Topic
<p>pl Newbie Posts: 4</p>	<p>This is the thread where B... is supposed to be posting kitten pictures <small>on: May 26, 2012, 3:23 pm</small></p> <p>Quote Remove Edit</p> <p>KITTENZ. Y NO KITTENZ.</p>
<p>Skakavaz Administrator Posts: 50</p>	<p>Re: This is the thread where B... is supposed to be posting kitten pictures <small>on: May 26, 2012, 9:03 pm</small></p> <p>Quote Remove Edit</p> <p>This is Chi:</p> 

Currently recruiting

SeeD is always recruiting for our 10 man raid team. We are looking to expand our roster to complement our current raid schedule of three nights per week (Tuesday/Friday/Saturday). Choose 'Apply to SeeD' to fill out a quick and easy application if you're interested!

	Death Knight	High
	Priest	High
	Mage	Medium
	Shaman	Medium
	Warrior	Medium
	Druid	Low
	Hunter	Low
	Paladin	Low
	Rogue	Low
	Warlock	Low

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Figure 9: A screenshot of a picture thread in the guild's forums.

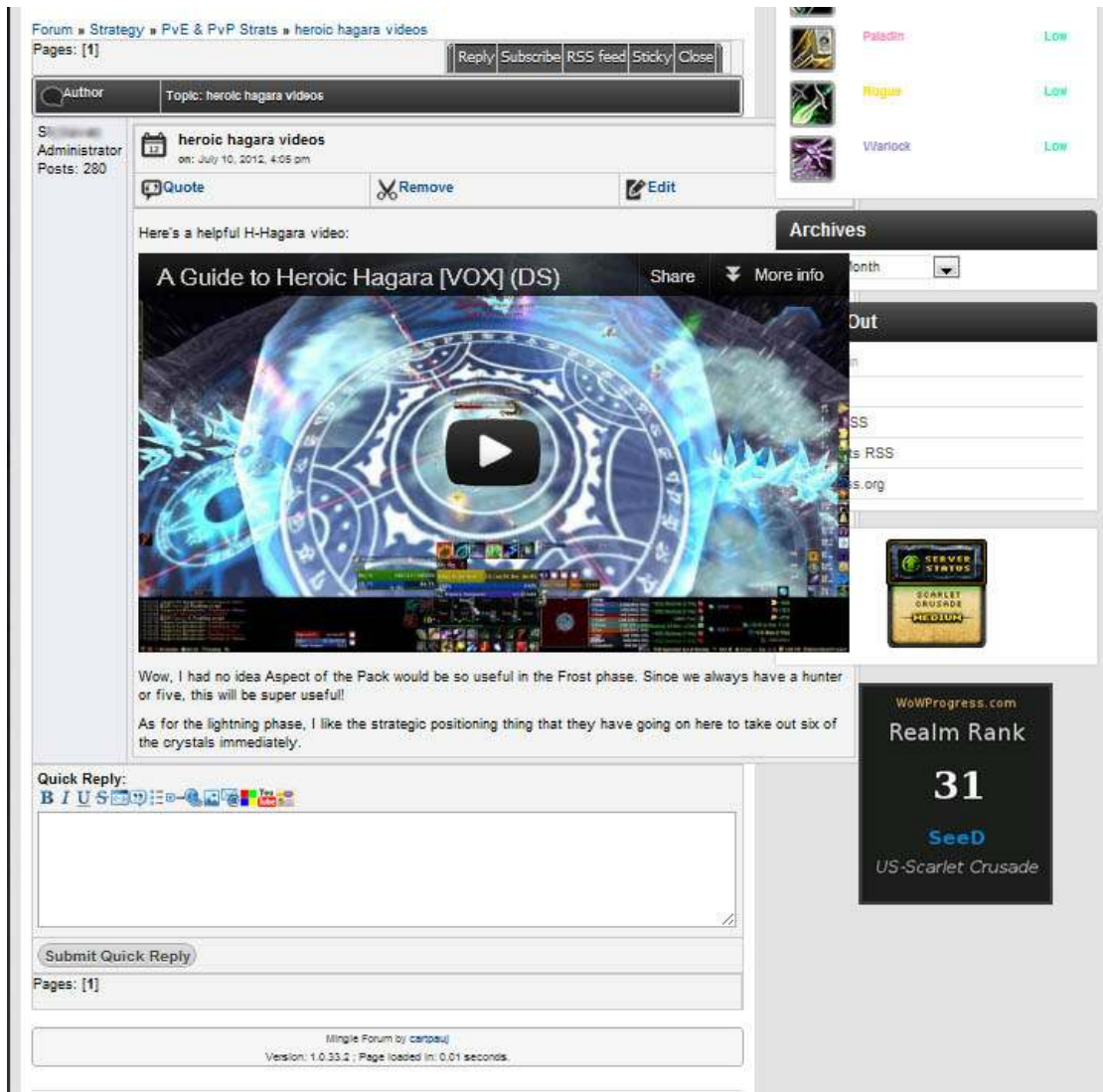


Figure 10: A thread on the guild’s forums for posting raid strategy videos.

Modal affordance is just one part of mode-switching; some modes are better suited to sharing certain kinds of information. This is not the whole story about mode-switching, however – modes have become attached to social rules, the most prominent of which is politeness.

5.2.2 Politeness and Privacy

A recurring theme in interview responses about mode-switching between chat and Ventrilo is the idea of privacy, which is similar to Sindoni's argument about Skype users switching to text chat to avoid being overheard. To most players, certain conversations were appropriate to have in a public space, whether that was the [Guild] chat channel or on Ventrilo during a raid; other conversations were not supposed to take place in public, and players would mode-switch to direct their talk to the appropriate audience. During raids, players who come up with ideas for a new strategy or who have a request for a break or a re-explanation of some aspect of the battle are often encouraged to whisper the raid leader privately rather than cause "unnecessary chatter" on Ventrilo.⁵ Keeping these conversations private was a politeness strategy for players.

One variation of the politeness/privacy concern for mode-switching is when a conversation is only relevant to a subgroup of people. Hohenheim describes two cases in which he switches to text chat instead of using Ventrilo: when talking to a single person or when discussing a specific topic inside of a larger event.

LBC: Are there can you think of situations in which you might prefer to communicate with somebody via chat? Rather than by Ventrilo if both are available options?

Hohenheim: If you're talking to an individual member of a group that is often easier. Or if you're talking to, you know like we'll sometimes discuss healing through a dedicated chat channel as opposed to Vent just because there's something else going on and it's only relevant to three people.

⁵ Wording borrowed from the <SeeD> raiding guildlines from 2008-2009.

The healers Hohenheim refers to have their own chat channel, in this guild the channel is called [SeeDhealz], specifically for discussing healing strategies during raids. This channel is used because there are only three people in a ten-person raid who are healers, and the other seven people in the raid may not be interested in healing strategies. Furthermore, when he says that “there’s something else going on”, he refers to other discussions that are often occurring on Ventrilo or in [Raid] chat which are relevant to everybody. In order to minimize interruptions of these broader conversations, players like Hohenheim often switch modes or channels within a mode to target their audience specifically.

As an extension of this concern, many participants mentioned privacy explicitly when discussing politeness, particularly not wanting to “call out” other players (meaning to publicly declare that another player was doing something wrong or behaving inappropriately). Walter, a player with a long history who had once led a guild, addressed this concern specifically and described how he mode-switched to address players who were doing something wrong.

Walter: You never call someone out, like one that's doing something wrong, in front of everybody to shame them. You do it after the fact so that you can teach them.

LBC: Like in a private Vent chat or like a whisper or how would you tackle a situation like that?

Walter: I've done both. I would, you know, if it was something that we were gonna be able to get through the night and it wasn't gonna hurt the raid, I would just talk to them - I would just pull them after the raid dispersed. I'd send a message like “hey I need to talk to you real quick” and drag them down to this [Ventrilo] channel. And I'd yank them down in the channel or

whatever and just say “hey you know I saw this in the raid tonight, this is you know this is an unacceptable behavior” or “hey I saw that you're doing this, you should be doing this”. Or if was something that kinda needs to be addressed quickly if we were taking a break I would send them an IM [whisper/private message] or again pull them down into a chat channel. [...] And we'd be talking about it in Officer Chat you know, “oh hey I saw this person do this, I'm gonna talk to them and make sure they know not to do that”.

Walter's preferred method of addressing players individually during raids was to avoid publicly “shaming” them, but rather use the private Ventrilo channels or a whisper (which he refers to as an IM) to discuss the issue one-on-one. Here, to address a politeness concern, Walter used a mode with a limited set of participants in order to minimize the face threat involved in telling a player that they were doing something wrong.

I am referring to the concept of “politeness” in this section very generally, painting a very nuanced construct with broad strokes. Politeness is a complicated notion that people must deal with in all areas of life, and much work has been done on politeness in spoken language. Most notably, Brown and Levinson's (1987) description of *face*, both positive and negative, has far-reaching analytical impact on issues of politeness in both physical and virtual interactions. While delving into positive and negative face constructs is outside of the scope of this work, I will refer to the concept of *saving face* or *face-saving*, which is both useful as an analytical term and a term that is often used by the participants in my community themselves. By saving face, I mean a linguistic act meant to remedy some offense to another person. The practice I refer to as *politeness* may be better called *considerateness* (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 136) or

civility (Papacharissi 2004), but to retain the connection to face, I continue to use the term “politeness”.

Politeness on the Internet has been a richly researched topic. One of the most interesting points was made by Baym (2010: 57-59) regarding flaming, the practice of engaging in extremely hostile and antagonistic conversations that involve insulting other participants in the interaction. Baym sums up prior research about flaming as coming from a cues-filtered-out approach, in which the lack of social presence and accountability causes participants to adopt a more hostile stance that would not be permissible in face-to-face interaction; however, Baym argues, if that were the case, then flaming would be much more common online than it actually is. Flame wars tend to be memorable (Lea et al., 1992), because in most online interactions, participants are more likely to be nice than to engage in flaming (Preece & Ghazati, 1998). Baym’s suggestion is that flaming is memorable because of the norms for polite communication, and that most people who do engage in flaming make a note that they know they are violating politeness norms in the community. The memorable nature of such hostile events suggests that politeness and face threats are concepts that people regularly engage with, even on the Internet which is sometimes characterized as a place where “anything goes”.

In online gaming, and in games in general, hostile behavior is often attributed to the fact that game spaces exist inside of a “magic circle”, or “a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 1950:8). Inside the magic circle, people can operate with an entirely different set of rules; however, Consalvo (2009) reframed the idea of the magic circle as not an entirely different set of rules that supplants those of the physical world, but rather a place where the game’s rules apply *in addition to* the social rules of ‘real-life’. *World of Warcraft* players in social guilds like <SeeD>, or those who are playing with

friends, have an expectation of following certain social rules and to avoid offending their friends and guildmates. That is, they must adhere to politeness concerns inside of the game as well as outside of it, because being rude to your roommate in the game may have consequences in real life. This is one case of the magic circle not being all-encompassing.

One of the most problematic events for potential face-threatening behavior involves rare and desirable loot. In raids, if an item such as an extremely powerful weapon drops from a boss, many players may wish to have such an item, and only one can be awarded it. “Loot drama” was one of the most wide-spread causes for players being offended and upset at their guildmates and friends. In my study, one such event occurred during the video recorded sessions. This event occurred during what is called a “mount run”, which I participated in on a regular basis with three friends, Jahaerys, Natholis, and Theon. The four of us would team up to go back to very old and easy game content in an attempt to win rare and interesting-looking mounts like the Swift Zulian Tiger or the Fiery Warhorse. The unspoken contract in this group was that, even if one of us won one of these rare mounts, we would continue to come back to help the others get their own mounts. This social contract avoided the face-threat involved in winning a valued item, and explicitly came into view during one of the video recorded sessions during which one player used mode-switching to verify the social rules for accepting one of the rare mounts.

In Table 3 below, the group of four finds the [Fiery Warhorse’s Reins], which summons one of the rarest and most-desired mounts in the game. None of the four players has this item, and so to decide who gets to take it, they use a random-number generator built into the game called a “roll”. The person who has the highest number wins the item. Matt rolls the highest number and therefore is the winner; however, he expresses social concerns for taking the mount. He wants the mount, but he wants to make certain that it is socially acceptable for him to take it;

he first speaks in the face-to-face mode to his friend and roommate Owen, asking if it is acceptable for him to take the mount if he promises to come back with the group every week (lines 408-410). He addresses his physical world friend first, because the consequences for angering his roommate are much more immediate than his online friends hundreds of miles away. After securing Owen’s approval, Matt makes his promise verbally to the others over Ventrilo (line 424) to mitigate the face threat that he caused by accepting the mount in line 416. Later, he finalizes his promise with a formal written declaration (lines 514-519) in a legalese style of English as though it is a contract with the others. A practical use of the written promise here is that the other players could take a screenshot, or an image capture of the screen, and save it to remind Matt of his promise later. In this example, Matt used mode-switching to address politeness concerns in a very nuanced way – he waited to accept the loot until he received confirmation from his roommate, the most immediate and problematic source of face threats, and then only after being assured that the proper face work was done, he accepted the item that caused a face threat to his online friends. More face work was needed after his acceptance, so he makes not only a verbal promise but also a written one.

Line	Time	Owen f2f [Jahaerys]	Owen Ventrilo	Matt f2f [Natholis]	Matt Ventrilo	Matt Proxemics	Parn Ventrilo	Theon Ventrilo	Chat
357	09:03.5			I don't know if I should roll on it or not					
359	09:04.7						kay roll it		
361	09:05.4							alright boys and girls	
362	09:08.0								Parnopaeus rolls 28
363	09:09.0								Jahaerys rolls 56

Line	Time	Owen f2f [Jahaerys]	Owen Ventrilo	Matt f2f [Natholis]	Matt Ventrilo	Matt Proxemics	Parn Ventrilo	Theon Ventrilo	Chat
366	09:11.0								Theon rolls 1
367	09:11.4						ouch!		
368	09:12.6	Ugh							
370	09:13.8			aw man					
373	09:14.7							ooh [laugh]	
374	09:16.1	you wanna roll?				types /roll			
375	09:17.0								Natholis rolls 67
377	09:18.6				ehhhhhh				
379	09:19.9	grats sir! [claps]							
380	09:20.6						ya:y!		
382	09:22.5				you guys sure?			Ventrilo	
385	09:23.9	of course							
387	09:24.3				I'll pass if you				
Mode mixing here – Owen affirms in face-to-face to what Matt says in Ventrilo									
391	09:27.6							I'll pay you for it	
394	09:30.7				oh but I don't want it to go to Jahaerys [Owen] [laugh]				
399	09:34.0								
401	09:35.0							well	
406	09:38.1							I'll pay if someone wants to pass it	
			Face-to-Face						
408	09:42.7			what if I just take it I'll come with you guys					
410	09:45.9	yeah! just we do this every week							

Line	Time	Owen f2f [Jahaerys]	Owen Ventrilo	Matt f2f [Natholis]	Matt Ventrilo	Matt Proxemics	Parn Ventrilo	Theon Ventrilo	Chat
414	09:48.2							I can has the money on me so:	
416	09:48.9					accepts loot			
417	09:49.0								Natholis has earned the achievement Fiery Warhorse's Reins!
424	09:54.1				I'll come with you guys every 'week'				
474	10:51.8	grats!							
475	10:52.3			I never won anything like that before [laugh]					
480	11:05.0	that's um: one of the rarest mounts in the game to get							
484	11:08.0			oh my go:d [laugh]					
485	11:09.1	so: grats							
488	11:11.3			thank you I'm glad I came [laugh]					
492	11:14.2			but yes I shall come every time					
496	11:16.8			and do uh heals for ya					

Line	Time	Owen f2f [Jahaerys]	Owen Ventrilo	Matt f2f [Natholis]	Matt Ventrilo	Matt Proxemics	Parn Ventrilo	Theon Ventrilo	Chat
499	11:23.5						let's see it!		
500	11:26.1					summons mount			
501	11:26.7			oh my god this thing's sick looking [laugh]					
503	11:30.7	ni:ce							
504	11:31.3						oh ho ho		
507	11:36.0								Natholis says: :O
508	11:36.8	yeah if you just want to do our mount with us from now on							
514	11:48.0								
519	11:57.0								

Matt uses /Say for a formal utterance

Natholis signs the dotted line...

Natholis says: I hereby will aid you... every week!

Table 3: Matt mode-switches for verification of an unspoken social contract, gradually increasing his audience as he moves between the modes.

From the video data, many instances of mode-switching occur between Ventrilo and text chat, and Matt proves himself to be an expert at navigating the social environment by mode-switching. Matt is perhaps the most expert player in the group, having played for the longest and having previously been in very hardcore guilds, and he demonstrates his expert status both in

playing ability and addressing social concerns. One of the most striking cases of this is during a raid in which Matt notices a healer who had misinterpreted the strategy for a particular boss (ironically it was Walter (playing his character Joannis), the same person who expressed the need for care in addressing raid misbehaviors in his interview). Instead of calling Walter out on Ventrilo or in the public raid chat, Matt instead uses a text chat channel that only he, his friend Owen, and myself were present in. He chose this channel because I was acting as the healing leader for that particular raid, and by informing me of the problem I could then tell Walter what to do. This excerpt can be seen in Table 4. In his mode-switching, Matt combines both of the motivations discussed above by Walter and Hohenheim: he does not want to call someone out and shame them publicly because that would be an extreme face-threat and possibly disrupt the raiding environment, but he also directs his talk to a relevant party who can do something about the issue.

Line #	Time	Owen f2f [Jahaerys]	Matt f2f [Zalbar]	Blake f2f [Exelsior]	Theon Ventrilo	Chat	Chat 2
519.	09:46.7			did you die too?			
520.	09:48.1			let's see here who all is up	Face-to-Face		
521.	09:48.6		the offtank died so yeah I'm all alone				
522.	09:50.1	one offtank died					
523.	09:50.8			oh it might be from the the heal from Joannis that I got			
525.	09:54.9		you got another one?				
526.	09:56.1			ah well I got a heal from Joannis as I was in fighting so I had full health when I hit mortal strike			
529.	09:59.9		Yeah				
534.	10:07.8						
552.	10:23.3			where is that name (.) I can't spell it there we go			
560.	10:28.1						
562.	10:30.2	I just took forty six k to the face					
563.	10:30.5						
572.	10:36.4						
575.	10:42.0						
587.	10:54.4						
590.	10:58.7	how did I die?					
592.	10:59.9						
594.	11:00.6	I feigned death					
596.	11:03.2	oh well					
636.	11:39.2						
641.	11:43.4	oop!					
644.	11:47.0						
649.	11:52.2						

Face-to-Face

Chat

Matt switches

[7. TheBack-Room] Zalbar: Melee's getting healed

[7. TheBack-Room] Zalbar: Joannis

[7. TheBack-Room] Parnopaeus: probably a splash

[7. TheBack-Room] Zalbar: 17.5k
[7. TheBack-Room] Zalbar: >>

[7. TheBack-Room] Parnopaeus: okay that's not a splash

Ventrilo

um also one of the healers was healing the melee dps I don't know who was doing it but do not do that

the only people you should be healing is the tank that you are assigned to

if you heal the melee dps you are going to kill them

Table 4: Mode-switching in a raid environment.

These motivations for mode-switching center around two particular concerns: saving the face of one's group members and addressing the relevant parties. These two concerns are intertwined; having too many people able to see a private or sensitive conversation turns that conversation into a spectacle (Scollon 1999), which then makes the interaction more about the performance for the onlookers than the interaction itself. In Walter's words, discussing a person's shortcomings in public makes it into a "shaming" rather than a teaching moment, in which the gaze of the spectators alters the nature of the interaction itself. The audience, therefore, is a necessary part of the mode and can change the meaning of an interaction. This distinction is often articulated by players; for instance, Mindy (who is Walter's wife) mentioned in her interview that she was a "terribad player" in the beginning of her *World of Warcraft* playing career, and that she wished that people in her first guild would have told her what she was doing wrong but that she thought they were afraid of shaming her, specifically her husband who was trying to save face. Mindy recalls how she learned to raid by asking for help from a LiveJournal (blogging) community of strangers who were not afraid to tell her what she needed to know.

Mindy: Well like I said nobody ever explained to me what the difference was between party mechanics and single-player mechanics. [...] And it wasn't until I was in a um group with three other three or four other people that knew me personally. And like {Walter} didn't tell me which I thought I think he didn't want to criticize me because I was his girlfriend or fiancée or whatever. Um but I really wish somebody had told me because I thought I was like [silly high-pitched voice] oh lalalalala I just a little mage blah blah blah [regular voice] and I just wasn't doing it right. [...] Actually I didn't raid until Karazhan. Karazhan was my first raid and um they did eventually take me. Probably when they were desperate and they

didn't have anybody else. [...] Um by that time I had a little bit more understanding of how to do things. [...] And {Walter}, it was kind of like a 'come to Jesus' moment where {Walter} was like "you need to learn how to do this this and this before you can go." So I went onto WoW-ladies which is the LiveJournal community for female WoW players and I um asked them like what can I do to get raid ready. And so somebody looked at my armory profile and said you need to have this, like none of your stuff has sockets none of your stuff has enchants, you know, like some of your gear is the right level and some of it's not, so you need to do this this this and this before you can go. You don't have any professions. You know I didn't have any of that stuff. So I went and did all that and once I did all of that um I really was more ready to go.

Mindy targets the potential problems that politeness can cause in this community – by not wanting to offend a friend, players risk not helping others get better at playing the game. This is a counterpoint to the oft-observed rudeness of strangers in games like *World of Warcraft*. While it is true that insults and degradations of players happens often in the larger *WoW* community, within tightly-knit guilds like <SeeD>, politeness must be attended to in order to preserve the community.

It bears noting that this perception of the embarrassment and the spectacle of public shaming, while not unique to the guild <SeeD>, is not the same from guild to guild. In fact, according to much of the literature on MMO gaming communities, the practices in place in <SeeD> seem anomalous. Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 449) note that a player's actions in an online game are quite separate and distinct from the actions they might take in a physical space. This allows players to engage in actions that would be immoral or illegal in the so-called 'real

world’, such as threatening others, stealing, and even killing other players. Ensslin (2012) describes how this separation of game rules and real-world rules in gaming communities results in “the magic circle lift[ing] the rules of politeness we know from many areas of everyday life and replac[ing] them with alternative standards of appropriate and accepted behavior, which include practices considered inappropriate by discourses of power, such as swearing and face-threatening utterances” (104).

Why is <SeeD> so different? One of the primary reasons is that many players – like Mindy and Walter, or Matt and Owen – play *World of Warcraft* in a guild with their friends from both online and their physical lives. Interactions in a game can have consequences outside of the game for those who play together. The separation between physical and virtual which many scholars describe does not exist in the same way in this community because of the overlap of communities of practice. While the magic circle does change the rules for practices in the game world – we can kill other players, for instance – the magic circle does not override the relationships and ties that exist in the physical world.

It is not only the physical world relationships which cause politeness practices to remain in place; the focus of the community and their gaming goals affect how politeness discourse operates. The deployment of a shaming spectacle is one of the aspects that delineates a hardcore guild from a casual guild. Players in more “hardcore” guilds – that is, those guilds who focus on achieving the best possible (and fastest) accomplishments in the game – are known for pushing their members much harder than casual guilds like <SeeD>. For a hardcore guild, public shaming is a regular part of the guild’s interaction as part of the mission to kill the most difficult bosses as quickly as possible; politeness, in these guilds, is treated differently as they do not consider it a face-threat to tell their members that they could improve their gameplay. Rather,

hardcore guilds rely on this model of politeness to achieve their impressive gaming results. Ensslin's observations about the replacement of politeness rules may apply in hardcore guilds and in gaming communities where players do not have outside-game ties. This is akin to what Baym (2010: 59) observes about flaming: "Groups with argumentative communication styles encourage people to conform to the group's style, while those with more civil styles invoke more courteous behavior. [...] In some groups, flaming is a form of playful sport." In a casual guild, social interaction is valued more highly than raid progression which results in a "civil style"; calling someone out publicly is highly face-threatening and regarded as a "last resort" event, only done in the most frustrating of scenarios. Players who did not like the hardcore raiding environment often sought out a guild like <SeeD> with a more social orientation that privileges camaraderie and interaction over game progress – a place where, as Matt once said, "people don't yell at me all the time". Furthermore, casual guilds are often sought out by players who play the game with their "real-life friends". Several players in <SeeD> at the time of my ethnography had previously been in more hardcore guilds and discussed the differences in their interviews. One player in particular, Rawka, phrased the difference very well.

Rawka: [...] in that type of guild raiding scenario, if you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing or if you're making mistakes, they're gonna call you out on it. Not only are they gonna call you out on it, they're gonna tell you how to fix the problem, and if you don't FIX the problem, like very soon, they're gonna replace you.

LBC: Let me ask, do they do that sort of thing publicly, like in front of everybody else? Do they call you out and tell you what you're doing wrong where everybody else can see, or?

Rawka: Definitely, yeah, it's just right in Vent. There's no reason to go to another channel. They're there to down the boss and if you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing and getting in the way of that, you they're gonna tell you. They're not gonna waste any time. They wanna get in there, they wanna get out, they want to get their loot, they wanna progress for the night, or, clear whatever it is the raid leader or the officers have designated as what they're gonna do for that night, and then be done.

LBC: [...] I get the feeling from a lot of people on Scarlet Crusade um that people getting called out on Vent or like publicly in raid chat is uh, like, embarrassing [...] how do you view that, like calling people out publicly?

Rawka: Um, I don't think it's necessary unless it's an ongoing thing. I believe it's the officers' and raid leaders' jobs to pay attention to stuff like that and that should be kept to whispers, um, because everybody has a job that they're doing, you know, whether it be a tank, a DPS or a healer. I don't need to worry about- well, I mean, to a certain extent I DO need to worry about the tank doing his job, but it's not for me to say that he's not doing his job, so I don't let that bother me and that's, that's up to you guys to uh, to deal with that. (5) With that being said though I think there is a point of no return and I think we've reached it a couple times with a few people that we've raided with in the past, where they're just not listening to ideas that other people are trying to help them with, and it is just, it is very frustrating.

Rawka points out a key difference between casual and hardcore guilds, which is where the “point of no return” is which will cause face-threatening outbursts in more public channels. The topic of anger-inducing events was studied by Barnett et al. (2010), who surveyed players of *World of Warcraft* about the scenarios in the game which caused the greatest player anger. While they did not differentiate between casual and hardcore players in their study, most of the anger-causing behaviors they document center around players not following instructions in raids, such as those who “do not pay attention in raids/instances and cause wipes”, “make the same mistake repeatedly and cause wipes”, “repeatedly do not do what they are asked to do in raids”, and “do not act on instructions they should be listening to” (150). These are the same behaviors that Rawka was talking about; in fact, I remember an incident that was exactly what Rawka was referencing in his final statement about the point of no return and being frustrated with other players not listening to instructions. It was a time when I, as a player, had to break the politeness rules of mode-switching in an attempt to alleviate an extremely frustrating situation in which the usual strategies were not working. It was a situation in which my need to follow politeness rules clashed with my need to enjoy my playing experience, and demonstrates the tension that can occur between these needs and the effects of having to negotiate them.

5.2.3 Autoethnographic interlude: You can’t blow up the back plate

As a player, I enjoy raiding, but I do not like to be in charge of raids. I prefer to sit back and just play, maybe occasionally help the healers out with a strategy or offer an idea for fighting a difficult boss, but mostly I like to follow. Sometimes, though, I must step up and lead a raid if nobody else is available. On a Friday night in February 2012, <SeeD> is working on a boss battle called the Spine of Deathwing, and our regular raid leader is on a computer without a

working microphone. It is up to me to call out the warnings that need to be called, and to give the vocal directions that are necessary in a fight like this one.

Spine of Deathwing is the first part of a two-part battle at the end of the Dragon Soul raid dungeon. This is the final battle for the *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* expansion where ten people are tasked with riding the back of a gigantic dragon named Deathwing and annoying him enough to cause him to crash into the ocean. The way to annoy Deathwing is to kill the dragon's fiery minions that spawned from his blood in such a way that the minionsexplode, destroying the armor plates on Deathwing's back in the process. By destroying three of these plates in order from his tail to his neck, the raid team could injure or annoy Deathwing enough that he crashes into the ocean, thus beginning the second part of the fight.

<SeeD>'s ten-man raid team has been stuck on the Spine of Deathwing fight for a couple of weeks. We have a solid strategy, but everybody is still getting used to the battle and the things they need to do, and we have not yet successfully made it through this part of the boss battle. This particular week, our second tank is suffering from a power outage, forcing us to replace him with a friend from another guild named Vitaly. Vitaly, a very nice and generous person who had successfully tanked many raid encounters for us in the past, is not as familiar with the Spine of Deathwing fight as the rest of the raid. I had explained the fight to Vitaly with help from our main tank, Izzet; Vitaly says he had attempted this fight a couple of times in the past and feels like he knew enough about the strategy to successfully tank it.

Vitaly's job is to control the second fire minion and bring it to the second armor plate, near Deathwing's ribs, so that the rest of the raid could attack it and cause it to explode. On our first attempt, Vitaly takes his minion the wrong way, moving it back towards the tail rather than

towards Deathwing's head. "Okay, take it towards the head," I say over Ventrilo when I realize his mistake.

I wait, but the minion stays by the tail.

"Towards the head," I hear Izzet say on Ventrilo. "The armor plate towards the head, tank him there."

The minion remains by the tail.

"VITALY," I say, raising my voice. "Did you disconnect?" I wonder if maybe his game had disconnected and he couldn't control his character to move it to the right place. I furiously type in raid chat just in case he somehow could not hear me:

[Raid Leader] Skakavaz: VITALY???

"No, I'm here. He's by the armor plate," Vitaly says.

"Wrong armor plate, take him—" Just then, Skakavaz (my character) is attacked by another loose fire minion and dies. I could not heal myself through this attack because I was too busy addressing Vitaly. "—towards the front," I finish. Then, noticing that half of the raid was dead, I give the order to everyone to give up and die so we can try the fight again.

Everybody else leaps to their deaths from the back of Deathwing, and we all resurrect at the start of the encounter on a flying airship. "Okay, this time Vitaly, you have to make sure the minion is by the armor plate closer to Deathwing's head," I say as gently as I am able. "I know it's easy to get turned around because everything looks the same."

"No, you just have to blow up three plates," Vitaly says. "Wouldn't it be easier to blow up the one by his tail?"

"You can't do that," Izzet replies. "I've done this fight a million times and that never works."

“I swear, I was in a raid that did that once, and I saw a video where someone did it that way,” Vitaly insists. “It’s way easier.”

“But it doesn’t work. That plate doesn’t explode, you have to go towards his head,” Izzet responds.

This is all part of regular raid banter, as far as I can tell. People always compare their strategies, which I see nothing wrong with. Personally, I have never heard anything about whether or not you could blow up the back plate; I, too, had done this fight a million times before this particular battle, and had never seen it.

“Let’s just keep blowing up the front plate by his head, okay? We know that works and it’s not hard,” I decree, because I have to stop the strategy argument sometime. Seeing that everybody is ready, I initiate the battle and we are all flung to the back of the dragon.

Izzet grabs his minion and drags him to the correct armor plate. We kill it, the minion explodes, and the armor plate falls off. So far, so good. Vitaly grabs his minion and takes him to the back plate again.

“Vitaly, please take it to the front plate,” I say.

No response.

“Vitaly?” Izzet says.

Eversoul, our usual raid leader without a microphone, types in raid chat:

[Raid] Eversoul: VITALY

[Raid] Eversoul: MOVE IT TO THE FRONT

We all die again.

“Vitaly,” I say, trying to be gentle. “Did you not hear me say to bring it to the front plate?”

“I’m telling you, it works,” he replies.

I chew thoughtfully on a pretzel, trying to figure out what to do. Then, I see that Izzet has sent me a whisper:

Izzet whispers: he's doing it wrong on purpose, I've been trying to whisper him what to do but he wants to prove he's right.

That admission causes me to lose the remnants of my patience. I like Vitaly, and count him as a friend, but this is really annoying me and interfering with my ability to enjoy playing the game. Ignoring instructions given over Ventrilo, imposing his own strategy onto the rest of the raid, and ignoring both raid chat and a private whisper – we had used all of the available modes to get the message across to him and he was committing a dire breach of gaming etiquette, and I am left with no other choice. “Vitaly,” I say, gritting my teeth slightly. “I am your raid leader tonight. I told you to bring it to the front plate. Bring it to the front plate.” I pause, releasing my Ventrilo button. Realizing that I had just called him out in front of everybody and how face-threatening this is, I re-press the push-to-talk button and add, “Please.”

“Sorry,” he says quickly. “But I still think we should try it once.”

“No,” I reply, wishing that I could reach my hands through my computer monitor and smack him. “Stick to the strategy.” Once again, I pause and add, “Please.”

Vitaly is my friend, and I do not want to have to do this to him. But, as Rawka said, sometimes there is a point of no return, and you have to assert your authority in a time of extreme frustration. To me, in that moment, it seems like a horrible breach of politeness and I hate it. I worry to this day that I offended him.

We would not defeat Deathwing that night. The following week, power is restored to our second tank and Eversoul has her microphone working again, so I sit back and heal -- once

everything is returned to normal, we easily defeat Deathwing's Spine and progress in our raiding. Vitaly, on the other hand, would not join us again for a very long time.

5.2.4 Discussion

One of the ways that we can see the interactional rules in a situation is by noticing when they are broken. Just as analyzing mistakes as errors in channel use can show the ways that channels are expected to be used, so can analyzing breaches in mode use.

Mode-switching for politeness reasons – whether to avoid calling out a problematic player in front of friends or to avoid cluttering the chat boxes of other users with unnecessary chat – shows the ways that players strategically use the modes to direct their talk to appropriate audiences. Walter's assertion that it is always best to privately talk to a problematic player instead of publicly shaming them reflects the mentality of the majority of players that I encountered in the ethnography. Mode-switching, then, is a resource deployed by speakers to achieve social goals such as politeness and face-saving.

The switching of modes in this way is not universal, and the politeness rules of mode-switching may change from community to community based on their style of discourse and the makeup of the community. Players like Matt and Mindy, who game with friends from their offline contexts, may find themselves in complex social situations where they must adhere to expected politeness rules from the physical world, which may be problematic for their gaming interactions. Rawka discussed the way that hardcore raiding guilds used public calling-out as a tool for advancing their guild's goals for the evening. The rules in these types of guilds differ; although I cannot speak from direct ethnographic experience, multiple players mentioned this difference in their interviews. Calling a player out publicly is seen as a breach of the social

contract, an extremely face-threatening act that, in a casual guild like <SeeD>, can have social consequences. That is part of the guild's identity as a social-oriented casual raiding guild; however, in a hardcore raiding guild where raiding is the primary goal, the rules for mode-switching and face-saving differ. Thus, in the different strategies for mode-switching and politeness, a different interactional pattern is seen between two different types of guilds.

This distinction shows how the activity goals of a guild may manifest in their language use. Mode-switching, as a type of variety-changing and an interactional strategy, shows one way that hardcore guilds and social guilds display their goals through the use of language. Aside from one's social goals in playing a game like *World of Warcraft*, mode usage has wide-reaching effects on identity and interaction in the game world.

6.0 MULTIMODALITY AND IDENTITY

In the previous chapter, I discussed ways that mode-switching and politeness can show the orientation of players towards a more social-oriented community or a progression-oriented community. This can be seen as a way that features of discourse display one's alignments. However, broader issues involved in mode usage can shape the way discourse progresses, including the choice of whether or not a person uses a mode at all; in this way, mode is a discourse-shaper in addition to being a resource. This is especially the case when considering the use of the voice chat.

A person's voice can reveal many traits about the speaker that may not come through in text-based computer-mediated communication. Most notably, vocal pitch can be an indicator of sex or age, and language variety can also index a person's geographical location or social class (Johnstone et al. 2006; Kiesling 2011). These identity aspects of the voice can cause speakers to be reluctant to use voice-based modes in computer-mediated contexts; however, the unspoken social rules involved in using voice-based modes can have other interactional consequences. In chapter 5, I explored the ways that multimodal communication can cross boundaries between the virtual and the physical in terms of politeness – that is, relationships in the physical realm with friends, family, or significant others can impact the ways that politeness functions in this virtual world. To preserve the relationships, one must use politeness forms that more closely resemble those used offline, contrary to what some researchers of politeness in gaming communities have

suggested. I propose that this line of thought may be extended to identity portrayals – when the lines between physical and virtual are crossed or blurred, identity constructs can be problematized. This is not unique to multimodal gaming communities, but rather is an extension of the *networked existence* afforded by users of social media sites that connect the offline self to an online presence (see boyd 2011 for a discussion of multimodality and the presentation of self in social networking). In this second section of the dissertation, I will present the complex nature of identity construction in the *World of Warcraft* community I studied, and show how multimodality serves as a resource that connects the virtual and the physical, both enhancing identity portrayal and problematizing it.

In this chapter, I will review pertinent literature about identity in computer-mediated contexts with a particular focus on how mode usage can affect portrayals and perceptions of identity. I will connect these observations to ideas about authenticity and trust and describe how these practices function in virtual worlds. This will serve as theoretical grounding for the observations from my fieldwork. In following chapters, I will explore how Ventrilo in particular exists as a unique resource for both presenting and obscuring identity.

6.1 IDENTITY ONLINE

Early research – and some that continues presently – paints a picture of the Internet as a place where identity is fluid and malleable. Because physical cues are filtered out in online contexts (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire 1984), scholars like Danet (1998) theorize that communicators are easily able to perform any identity that they choose. Filiciak (2004) suggests that the player's experience in a game like *World of Warcraft* is “an idealized image of the situation of the

postmodern human creature, in which a user can freely shape his own ‘self’” (90). Bessiere, Seay, & Kiesler (2007) suggest that the character is a representation of the “ideal” physical self, that “anonymity and fantasy frees players from the yoke of their real-life history and social situation, allowing them to be more like the person they wish they were” (534). Assertions that the “real self” can be best expressed online (McKenna, Green, & Gleason 2002) insinuate a separation between one’s physical identity and one’s online identity (Paasonen 2005); the extreme version of this position is that online personae are independent of their physical animators (Stone 1996). In response to these constructions of self, Nancy Baym questions: “...how do we know where, exactly, true selves reside? Furthermore, what if the selves enacted through digital media don’t line up with those we present face to face, or if they contradict one another? [...] Is there such a thing as a true self anymore? Was there ever?” (2010:3). O’Brien has theorized that the self exists in fragments, one that is anchored in the physical world and one anchored in the virtual world, and that this multiplicity of identity is licensed because of the media ideologies associated with online communication (1999). Gatson (2011) has shown in her work on online fandom spaces that presentation of self in online communities happens in both online and offline spaces, but that “a rendition of the online persona as inherently less truthful – or at least less dense/rich/full – than offline presentations is problematic at best” (224). In fact, according to Gatson’s work, online presentations of identity may be *more* authentic because they can occur in safe spaces with different rules, where people are able to reveal aspects of their personas that they might feel they need to hide offline for fear of harmful repercussions.

In virtual worlds and online games especially, scholars make much of this separation of online and offline identity through the concept of the *magic circle*, or the idea that playing a game is “a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of

its own” (Huizinga 1950:8). Criticisms of the magic circle abound, including Consalvo’s (2009) assertion that ‘real life’⁶ rules *do* apply to game worlds in addition to the rules of the game. I have shown in previous chapters how politeness is one construct in which the ‘real life’ rules are in play in addition to those in the game world. Other criticisms of the magic circle center around the blurring of the lines between the game world and the physical world, and therefore the recasting of the magic circle as a “membrane” or a more porous boundary where the virtual and the physical influence each other (Bainbridge 2010: 13). There may be significant “bleed” between these multiple fragments of the selves across the lines of the magic circle, in which aspects of a player’s physical identity may affect the choices they make for their avatars (Waern 2010). However problematic the particulars of the concept may be, the idea of the magic circle is important to retain because participants in virtual worlds are aware of the boundary between the virtual and the physical, and those boundaries may be reinforced by interaction with the same people in online and offline spaces (Boellstorff 2010). Players know that rules are different online and offline, and while some players seek offline interaction with certain friends from their online communities, many prefer their contact to remain online only. Although it is important to remember that the magic circle is a problematic construct, I will reference the magic circle because it exists as an important core idea to members of the *World of Warcraft* community. In general, when I refer to the magic circle, I mean the fluid and porous boundary between offline and online contexts. The characteristics of the magic circle may change in different interactions and may shift throughout time, but it is always salient to interlocutors in some capacity.

⁶ I use the term 'real life' in quotes because other authors use this phrase, but the name is problematic because it insinuates that one's experience online is somehow not real when compared to physical experience.

As players interact more with each other on either side of the magic circle and eventually form relationships, they will inevitably come into contact with multiple fragments of identity and begin to construct a larger conceptualization of their interlocutors. Understanding this multiplicity of identity is essential for the comprehension of a player's identity as a Self-network, which is, according to Banks and Martey (2012), "a coordinated network of personas which, themselves, are networks of material and immaterial actors". The progression that tends to happen in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* begins with a series of fleeting interactions that are goal-oriented, such as completing a quest or teaming up to defeat a difficult creature; these interactions happen inside of the magic circle, in the virtual world itself. Repeating these interactions over time with the same person or group of people leads to a deepening of the relationship as the interlocutors learn more about each other. Schaap describes a similar phenomenon in his ethnography of roleplaying culture in the MUD *Cybersphere*: "Most players are primarily concerned with the most salient character traits and psychological motivations of their character [...] it is much more important whether the character is aggressive or not, really talkative or more silent, prone to engage in a relationship or more of keeping a personal distance" [2002: 37].

When a player is interacting only briefly with another in a game environment, the physical identity of the other player is not important, only their abilities in the game and their play style. If these interactions continue into stable game relationships, whether as part of a regular raid team, roleplaying partners, or friends in a guild, players seek to know about the identity of their comrades beyond the virtual space. Once a player begins to engage with other players in ways that reference identity constructs outside of purely in-game features, the interlocutors begin to construct the Self-networks of their friends. They begin to understand that

not only is their friend a Draenei paladin healer in the game, but they learn that their friend is a female linguist in 'real life' who enjoys science fiction novels and jazz music. However, in learning more about their online friends' offline selves, a tension arises between the real and the virtual in which people struggle with what to reveal about their 'real-life' selves (Li et al. 2008); it is also at this point of construction of the Self-network when issues about authenticity arise. Part of seeking this authenticity is scrutinizing the performance of identity for cues about the player's physical identity. Furthermore, these physical identity traits are not often individualized, but rather attempts to fill in pre-conceived categories of identity like gender, age, and nationality. Language is one widely used resource for showing membership in certain demographic categories, through the use of enregistered variables such as (ING)/(IN) variation, shifted vowels, or lexical choices (Campbell-Kibler 2011, Agha 2006). Beyond language use, players can display authenticity in many modes, some of which are linguistic and others not – posting photos of themselves on guild websites, sharing links to music or books, and adding their virtual world friends on Facebook are just a few of the ways that I have observed players engaging the Self-network of others beyond the boundaries of *World of Warcraft*.

As has been established repeatedly in the literature, one of the earliest and most important parts of identity to interlocutors is gender (Turkle 1997, O'Brien 1999, Paasonen 2005, Schaap 2002). Schaap writes about gender in virtual worlds, "online there is no way in which one can ultimately claim to be in possession of the appropriate objectively and externally real body. [...] in the absence of a real body, the virtual, substituted body will be scrutinized for clues regarding the gender of the 'real' body behind the keyboard. The main difference is the fact that [in real life] there is a basic trust in the fact that if a body appears to be of a certain gender it *is* that gender, while online there is no such fundamental trust." (73) Linguistic and stylistic cues are

one resource often used for authenticating identity, which has been extensively studied with regards to gender and sexuality. Herring (1998) has described the ways that women online who seem “too sexy to be true” (that is, by describing herself as “hot” or aggressively pursuing sexual activities) have their gender questioned. In general, according to Herring & Martinson (2004), the stylistic cues about gender online tend to be the same ones in spoken language: males use “assertions, self-promotion, rhetorical questions, profanity, sexual reference, sarcasm, challenges, and insults” while females use “hedges, justifications, expressions of emotion, representations of smiling and laughter [emoticons], personal pronouns, and supportive and polite language” (427). It is usually a combination of these features that clues interlocutors in to the authenticity of their conversation partner’s gender, rather than any one feature in particular (Thomson and Murachver 2001).

Gender is not the only identity aspect that comes under such scrutiny online, although it is often the first trait to be questioned. Similar practices of scrutiny of authentic identity performances have been studied in regards to race in online skinhead forums, in which discursive cues of ‘whiteness’ as an identity performance were sought out by participants (Campbell 2006). In *World of Warcraft* specifically, the Chinese ethnic identity is problematic due to the racialization of cheating and gold farming (Dibbel 2007), which has led to Chinese players being unfavorably judged in game contexts (Nakamura 2009). Age is another identity that can be problematic in performances, such as children who are obviously playing adult characters in online games and cause interactional confusion (Wadley and Gibbs 2010).

Recent changes in the social landscape of the Internet have provided the average user with more resources for authenticating the identities of their interlocutors. With the growing networking of daily life, a substantial population of people is “always on” (Baron 2009),

meaning that they are connected to the Internet in some way no matter what they are doing in the physical space. Along with this hyper-connectedness comes more bleeding between physical identity and virtual identity to the point where there may not be clear-cut distinctions between one's online and offline personas (Hongladarom 2011), and because of this, many gaming platforms seek to anchor online identity in the physical world in the same way as Facebook and other social media platforms have by using real names and locations (Zhao et al. 2008). These attempts to incorporate offline identity in new forms of communication are not without backlash -- one such example of this phenomenon was the introduction of voice chat in *Second Life*, which players fought against as an unwanted intrusion of the real into the virtual (Boellstorff 2008). In *World of Warcraft*, the introduction of the RealID system caused a similar uproar: RealID allowed players to add each other as friends on a special friends list, but this list allowed others to see players' real names. This resulted in some players being stalked and their personal information being publicly shared (Persson 2011); on a larger level, a large subgroup of players resented this intrusion into their anonymity, which caused a large-scale boycott and protest on *World of Warcraft*'s official forums (Albrechtslund 2011). As of the writing of this work, RealID has been accepted into use in the community, but most players limit their RealID use to those they trust and consider to be close friends. Eversoul, a member of <SeeD>, described her reservations about the RealID system in a way that I believe reflects a widespread feeling about RealID in the community:

LBC: How do you get somebody as a RealID friend?

Eversoul: I think we'd have to -- I would have to know somebody for a little while, and communicate with them regularly and you know, make sure they're not a stalker.

LBC: Have you had a bad experience with a stalker-like person in Warcraft?

Eversoul: No, and I hope to never, but I wouldn't just randomly add somebody who I didn't feel like I knew at least a little bit.

LBC: Yeah, I've seen people giving out their RealID in like, 5-man dungeons, like random people they've never met before. It's kind of scary to me.

Eversoul: Yeah, I don't. I mean I guess if that works for them, but it's not something I would do, that's for sure. I feel like I know the people on my RealID list, pretty well, and they're not just like some random stranger.

When the virtual and the actual collide, as is the case with voice chat and the use of real names and contact information in systems like RealID, identity can be problematized in interaction. The identity construct that is most often scrutinized is gender – both the expressions of gender and the ramifications for expressing a non-male gender identity. Gender in virtual worlds, and especially *World of Warcraft*, has been studied extensively by other scholars, and I will turn to this literature in the next section.

6.2 THE ASSUMED MASCULINITY OF *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

Nardi (2010) has an entire chapter in her ethnography of *World of Warcraft* dealing with gender in the game community. She characterizes the *WoW* space as “the boys’ tree house” (p. 152) with women existing as a minority in this tree house. In Nardi’s account, “male discourse” (she labels it this way because it was primarily males who engaged in it) was the norm, not the exception, and women were expected to conform to the discourse around them. Examples that Nardi cites are women being asked to share nude photographs of themselves, homophobic language like

“fag” or “homo”, and the preponderance of sexual metaphors like “raping enemies”. This kind of language made the women in Nardi’s study uncomfortable, but they were expected to tolerate it even though “in the workplace or the classroom, in family activities, and in many mixed-gender venues, the kind of masculine discourse that was utterly normal in *World of Warcraft* would not be permitted” (155). This is again the influence of the magic circle, the same one that Ensslin referenced with regards to politeness in raiding guilds – because this is a game world where consequences for actions are suspended or modified, people are permitted to engage in any kind of discourse they like. In Nardi’s words, masculine discourse “was embraced, exaggerated, and given free expression” (156).

Sexuality in *World of Warcraft* was another topic Nardi discussed in depth. Specifically, she described two interactive planes where sexual activities occurred. In the first, and most dominant plane, she described the assumed maleness of players, even those who were playing as female characters. This assumption “dampened heterosexuality, creating a relaxed space in which males did not have to worry about heterosexual activity” (p. 158). Her evidence for the existence of this plane is the regular practice of males choosing female avatars, and how this practice is not generally questioned by the average player. While many players choose to create avatars that match gender with their physical world identity, a substantial portion of players chooses to create avatars of a different gender – 15.5% of all players engage in this practice (Huh & Williams, 2010), enough to make the practice not anomalous and widely accepted (Rosier, 2011). This phenomenon is further described by MacCallum-Stewart (2008), who describes the avatar as an object owned by the player rather than an extension of the self – a mindset that players are used to, having had avatar appearance and gender imposed on them in single-player games like the *Tombraider* series. According to MacCallum-Stewart, because the avatar is an

owned object, therefore the sex of the avatar is not seen as a reflection of the sex of the player. The conventional response, and one that is widely accepted, is that the player will refer to the pleasurable male gaze, stating something along the lines of “If I’m going to play this game for hours, I’d rather stare at a sexy avatar” (Nardi 2010, 159). This was never questioned, and the heightened sexuality of female avatars was reinforced by the game’s design, which changed the designs of armor on female characters to bare midriffs and enhance the shape of the character’s breasts (Fron et al. 2007). All of these aspects confirm the assumed maleness of the average *World of Warcraft* player. The secondary plane of sexuality that Nardi describes is a counterpoint to the first, because it is the place where cross-gender intimacy occurs. Players flirt and engage in cross-gender in-game sex with each other with few implications; however, this practice relies on the existence of players of the other sex. The existence of this second plane of sexuality threatens the first – the women may intrude upon the tree house, or distract the boys from engaging in serious gaming activities. To avoid this, male players often engage in masculinist discourse during advanced gaming activities (such as raiding) that are considered the domain of men. The discourse is considered effective if it offends or excludes female players.

The masculinist discourse and the assumed maleness of players creates an environment where women have to “come out” as female players, and where they assume risks for doing so. Rather than flee from the game, in Nardi’s study the women either conformed to the masculine discourse or avoided it by building their own networks of people they enjoyed playing with. Those who did conform to the discourse generally avoided “hardcore masculinist rhetoric” themselves, such as disparaging other players by calling them “little girls”, using “rape” casually as a verb, or using disparaging slang terms for genitalia like “cunt”. However, part of conforming to the discourse is not disparaging others’ use of these terms. Taylor (2003) has described how

women in online games are not subjected to the same risks as they are in the physical world, which gives some a sense of empowerment that allows them to confront those who use "repulsive language"; in fact, some female players called out others on their uses of such terms, but overall, the "masculinist rhetoric" went largely unchallenged. In a sense, according to Nardi, these women who accommodated to the surrounding masculinist discourse were viewed as simply "one of the boys".

The alternative – that is, objecting to masculinist discourse and freely performing a female identity – has problematic consequences. Women in games like *WoW* are free to create gendered and sexualized identities, but only within the restrictions imposed by the game's culture and that are deemed acceptable by the males who play (Eklund 2011). Those women who objected to the masculinist discourse were often forced into more casual guilds because of the threat of sexuality in *WoW* culture. As Nardi describes it, those who were firmly entrenched in the boys' tree house were afraid of the second plane of sexuality lest it disturb their gaming activities and get them relegated to the casual population. This resulted in women being silenced on Ventrilo because their voices would disturb the men, and even women being refused membership to very hardcore guilds like the top European guild <Nihilum> (p. 163). In studies of other virtual worlds, women in *Second Life* reported being sexually harassed after revealing their gender by talking on voice chat, and women playing *Dungeons and Dragons Online* reported feeling "weird and uncomfortable" when speaking on voice chat (Wadley and Gibbs 2010: 193). Tucker (2011) describes the widespread practice of *griefing*, or extensive harassment of a single player, as a means of policing the assumed masculinity and heterosexuality of populations of online game players. In her work, griefers often focused on those players who expressed a non-male or non-heterosexual identity that threatened the assumed male culture.

In the environment of assumed maleness, players seek cues about the identities of their interlocutors, especially when the other players report being non-male. Cues about being male are rarely looked for since the ‘default’ *World of Warcraft* player is assumed to be male. These cues may be linguistic style cues, like the ones described by Herring and Martinson (2004), but they may also be more directly accessed through listening to the voice over Ventrilo. The indicators may also be more overt, like use of pronouns; however, overt indicators can invite unwanted scrutiny, even in the most casual objective-oriented discourse. I have had several experiences of being forced into admitting my gender because of my pronoun use and have been subsequently harassed or annoyed by other players, and developed strategies to avoid detection or deflect attention from myself. At times, these strategies interact with assumed maleness and assumed heterosexuality in *World of Warcraft* culture, revealing the extent of the assumptions about identity held by the average player.

6.2.1 Autoethnographic interlude: Colle and Szocske

It is late 2011, and I am playing Szocske, my male Night Elf warrior. I am in a dungeon with my boyfriend (who is playing his female warrior Colle) and three random unknown individuals. My boyfriend and I are chatting on Skype while we adventure through this very familiar dungeon; since the objective of dungeons is to quickly defeat enemies in order to gain loot, not much interaction happens in text chat that isn’t about loot or strategy. The dungeon is going smoothly with everybody playing their parts with no problems, until my boyfriend’s connection is disrupted and disconnects him from *World of Warcraft*. Since I am still online, I type in [Party] chat a warning about our missing party member. While we are waiting for him to reconnect, the following conversation ensues:

[Party] Szocske: hold on, Colle disconnected.

[Party] Szocske: he's logging back in now.

[Party] Hamford: ok

[Party] Hamford: u guys real life friends or something?

[Party] Szocske: yeah, he's my boyfriend

[Party] Hamford: o

[Party] Hamford: so r u like, gay lovers?

I realize belatedly what is happening here -- upon seeing my male character, Hamford had assumed I was male, and therefore when I used the term "boyfriend", Hamford figured that he or she must have encountered a gay couple playing *World of Warcraft* together. It seems odd to me that this would be the first assumption rather than a woman might be playing a male character, but it shows the assumed maleness in action. Used to this sort of behavior, I laugh about it on Skype with my boyfriend. "Hamford just asked if we were gay lovers because I referred to you as my boyfriend," I inform him.

"Well that's fun," my boyfriend replies, and I can hear the *World of Warcraft* loading screen music playing in the background, indicating that he is in the process of reconnecting to the game. "Let's blow his mind," he adds a moment later.

I am happy to oblige.

[Party] Szocske: something like that

[Party] Hamford: which 1 of u wears the pants?

Colle has come online.

[Party] Szocske: we both wear pants when appropriate.

[Party] Colle: I'm back, sorry.

[Party] Colle: Everybody ready?

[Party] Hamford: i mean which of you is the girl?

[Party] Colle: I'm a girl.

[Party] Hamford: he just said u were his boyfriend

[Party] Colle: That too!

[Party] Szocske: I think Colle was talking about his toon.

[=avatar]

[Party] Hamford: i'm confused

[Party] Regnar: can we just go?

Hamford's confusion is funny to me, but Regnar points out that it's time to get back to the business of slaying monsters and getting loot. The group finishes the dungeon without another word about anyone's gender or sexuality. Hamford is someone outside of my home guild, and as such, I do not know what rules he operates by; his probing questions about our sexualities and preferences indicate that he is a potential harasser, or at least a person who will make my game experience less enjoyable. To deflect his attention, I enlist the help of my boyfriend to confuse this person because the danger of being harassed is more pertinent than the consequences of misleading him. It would have been a different story if Hamford had been a guild member – I would have immediately explained that I was female and attempted to avoid confusing someone in my guild.

The question for Hamford was never about the gender identity of the person behind the male avatar. In this particular instance, there was a conflict between assumed heterosexuality and assumed maleness – and for Hamford at least, assumed maleness won out. While playing Szocske, I never encountered anyone who questioned my gender identity in 'real life'; however, I was subjected to this question countless times on my female characters, even to the extent of male players placing bets on whether I was a female or not (see Section 4.2.1). The gender of an

avatar is one mode that may indicate the gender of the player – but since this is not a reliable indicator due to the widespread acceptance of avatar-player mismatch in gender, players look for other cues about identity to be found in the discourse.

6.3 CONCLUSION

The extant research on identity in online spaces is vast, and little of it explicitly addresses the impact of modes and multimodality on identity portrayal. One theme that can be taken from more recent work is the idea of the porous boundary between online and offline spaces which is sometimes referred to as the “magic circle”. Online communities do not exist in a vacuum – aspects of one’s offline identity come into play in a variety of ways, from players excusing themselves from a game event because of something happening in the physical world to women being grieved or excluded from game activities after talking on Ventrilo and revealing themselves to be not male. Identity has been theorized to exist as a Self-network, as connected fragments that exist in a variety of places both online and offline. Online identity portrayals are not any less truthful or complete than offline portrayals; rather, individuals in different spaces of life may encounter different aspects of the Self-network of their interlocutors.

Mode comes into play in the presentation of these identity fragments. When speaking on Ventrilo, cues about one’s identity can be easily heard in the voice. Pitch and tone can signal gender and age, and language variety can be connected to nationality, ethnicity, class, or location. Using voice-based communication in *World of Warcraft* is one of the first places that the real-virtual tension is encountered by the average player. In the following section, I will

describe how voice chat is problematic in terms of portrayal of identity, and the strategies used by those in the community to negotiate the portrayals of the self and others when using voice.

7.0 VENTRILO AND THE TANGLE OF IDENTITIES

One of the connections made most frequently in my interviews was between learning to use Ventrilo and the act of raiding. For most participants, the first interaction with Ventrilo was in conjunction with their first or earliest raids. Having Ventrilo (or another voice chat platform of choice, e.g. TeamSpeak or Mumble) was a requirement for joining raids, and the failure to use Ventrilo was grounds to be removed from the group. However, the use of Ventrilo and voice chat in general goes beyond the use of the mode to facilitate raiding as a group activity; once players use voice chat, even if their first use is in conjunction with raiding, often they continue to use the mode for other activities, even simply socializing. The necessary introduction of voice chat for raiding is a gateway into using voice chat more regularly.

The connection between Ventrilo and raiding is not just a confluence of activities, but rather has farther reaching consequences for team-building, identity portrayal, and language use. Because Ventrilo is a voice-based mode, identity characteristics evident in the voice are revealed to those who may not have had prior contact with the physical-world identities of their interlocutors. In this chapter, I will detail the impact that the use of voice chat has on identity portrayal, and some of the identity-based problems that players in the community deal with when they play.

<SeeD> as a guild differs markedly from some of the guilds studied by other researchers (e.g. Nardi 2010). <SeeD> is not only a more casual guild, but it is also a friendly place for

women and minorities, due to its history of being led and administered by women and people with non-heterosexual identities. Part of the analysis of the impact of voice chat on identity involves incorporating the history of the guild and the characteristics of the community. To begin, I will detail one particular rule in the guild's code of conduct, namely the prohibition of defaming remarks or degrading language about gender and sexuality, which had an impact on members' use of Ventrilo. I will contrast this in-guild usage with the guild members' feelings about usage of Ventrilo beyond the boundaries of the guild. In this analysis, I will show how aspects of the group identity shared by the guild affected voice chat usage in guild-sponsored events in which language was policed, which differ from outside-guild events where the guild's rules were not applicable. Finally, I will detail three particular themes that came up repeatedly in the interviews and in my observations – age, language variety, and gay-sounding speech – which index particular physical world attributes that affected players' participation in voice chat both inside and outside of the guild.

7.1 VENTRILO AND “HATE SPEECH”

Virtual harassment and cybercrime are a constant problem in online communities because of the non-physical nature of online interaction and the associated distance between interlocutors. Online communities are viewed as places with relatively free speech rules, and because of this experiences of harassment and cybercrime are often reframed in online contexts as less harmful or real than in offline contexts (Graca and Stadler, 2007; Wykes, 2007). Many communities online have sets of rules or expectations for their members which are designed to avoid scenarios in which members may be harassed, and many of these rule sets are imported from offline

contexts. This is one case where the line of the magic circle is porous. In other words, there is a “a negotiation process whereby normative on and offline behaviors are juxtaposed against behaviors viewed as either deviant or acceptable within the game world” (Downing 2009).

Language is one of the primary vehicles for harassment in an online community where physical action is not an option. In many online game communities, this harassment can take two common forms: first, “scamming”, or cheating other players out of goods and currency by lying, and second, personal attacks in the form of slurs and defaming language. I will primarily focus on the second type of harassment, since it was explicitly codified and dealt with by both the game developers and the guild's officers. *World of Warcraft*'s in-game rules prohibit the use of “inappropriate or offensive language”, which Blizzard Entertainment defines using the following criteria⁷:

The categories below detail language deemed to be highly inappropriate:

Racial/Ethnic

This category includes both clear and masked language which:

- Promotes racial/ethnic hatred.
- Is recognized as a racial/ethnic slur.
- Alludes to symbols of racial/ethnic hatred.

Extreme Sexuality/Violence

This category includes both clear and masked language which:

- Refers to extreme and/or violent sexual acts.
- Refers to extremely violent real life actions.

⁷ Quoted from: <http://us.battle.net/support/en/article/harassment-policy>

National

This category includes both clear and masked language which:

- Promotes national hatred.
- Is recognized as a national slur.
- Alludes to symbols of national hatred.

Sexual Orientation

This category includes both clear and masked language which:

- Insultingly refers to any aspect of sexual orientation pertaining to themselves or other players.

Any player found in violation of this policy may receive:

- A warning.
- A temporary suspension from the game.
- A Final Warning, with any further ToU violations resulting in account closure.

Within the game itself, players have the option to right click on an offending player's name and report them to Game Masters for language that falls under these categories. This does not stop players from engaging in such behaviors, but Blizzard Entertainment as a company does claim to take these reports seriously. Even though none of the players interviewed for this study mentioned ever being suspended or banned from the game as a result of using "highly inappropriate language" – likely due to the type of player that safe-space guilds like <SeeD> attract -- forum threads exist where players recall their stories of being suspended or banned which suggest that the rules against inappropriate language are enforced.⁸ In general, most

⁸ E.g. <http://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/752293-Share-your-WoW-banned-suspension-stories>

players try to avoid being suspended from the game, which means that they avoid using language deemed inappropriate in text chat in the game itself.

Ventrilo, however, exists in a space that is policed neither by Blizzard authorities nor any authorities associated with Ventrilo, and consequently players feel freer to talk about topics that might be taboo in the game because they will not incur punishment in *World of Warcraft* for their talk on Ventrilo. However, talk on Ventrilo is often policed by the authorities of the guild or the raid group that is using the Ventrilo channel, and thus players may be punished by their guild leaders for infractions on Ventrilo. One such extreme case of this was described in Section 4.2.3 with regards to Ghosting. In the guild <House of Dwarves>, officers regularly policed Ventrilo chat channels looking for people who were breaking their guild rules. In <Seed>, such overt policing was not typically done, but all members were expected to be respectful of each other in public channels and not use “hate speech”. In the guild’s charter, originally written in September 2007 by the first guild leader Averik, the official language is:

“We are a hate-free zone. This means that there is no hate speech in the guild. We are friendly to all races, genders, sexualities, nationalities, etc. If you use any hate speech (yes, this includes using “gay” as a synonym for “stupid”), you will be swiftly and harshly reprimanded. Using hate speech shows disrespect, and you never know who you are disrespecting.”⁹

Racist language happened fairly infrequently, with only two incidents of note in my ethnographic records – both involving Chinese people, recalling research by Dibbell (2007) and Nakamura (2009) about the racialization of cheating in online gaming, and which I will detail later in this chapter. By and large, players in the guild <Seed> were very conscious about racist and

⁹ http://www.seedguild.info/?page_id=7

nationalist language. However, as suggested by the charter's wording, the most problematic culprit was the casual use of slurs involving sexuality, such as "gay" as a synonym of stupid, bad, or lame. This particular use of "gay" has been studied in spoken language, and its use has found to be negatively associated with the well-being of non-heterosexual hearers (e.g. Lalor & Rendle-Short 2007, Woodford et al. 2012). Problematically, most users of this form of "gay" do not realize the implications of this meaning, and think that it's "no big deal" to use sexuality-based slurs in this way (Chonody et al. 2012).

There were some members of the guild who had never met a non-heterosexual person before, and most had never thought about the consequences of using this type of speech. Being in the guild and learning about the hate speech rule usually positively affected these players' usage of "gay" in particular, but also other associated types of speech. Kovax, who joined the guild at a young age (age 14), reflected on the hate speech rule years later:

Kovax: ...with <SeeD>'s rule, when I first joined, with the whole not saying "gay" and "faggot" and all that, it took me a while to get used to but now it's a rule that's been burned into my mind, I don't say, you know, "That's gay" anymore. I say that like "That's uncool" or something.

Another player who had a similar experience was Chromus, who also joined the guild when he was fourteen years old. Interviewed at age 18, Chromus said about his use of this type of language:

Chromus: When I first started playing the game, even when I met you, I was the normal 14 year old boy you know where everyone would say comments like 'oh that was so gay', 'you're so gay', and I didn't think anything of it. It was just another word like 'you're so stupid' but [...] that's very wrong.

And the fact that I didn't see that it was wrong was very disturbing because, you know, just because someone has a different preference than you doesn't mean - like why should you use their label as a derogatory term? And it was very eye-opening and since then I have never used that term as a derogatory term and I will actually correct people when they do use it.

The experiences of Chromus and Kovax point to a benefit of an experience like playing a MMORPG with a group of diverse people – both of these young men learned how to understand the people around them, and how to analyze their own language and the impact it had on others.

As a consequence to having these rules in place and having them actively and aggressively enforced by the guild's leadership, <SeeD> became a safe space for players to express themselves without fearing a personal attack based on their identity. Not only was this the case for sexuality-biased speech, but also for gender-biased speech. Degrading remarks about women based solely on their gender were not permitted and often resulted in dire consequences for the offender. A chat transcript from November 2007 illustrates these consequences -- the guild leader, Averik, interacted with a guild member, Teryn, who had joined the guild recently and obviously had not read the rules.

[Guild] Averik: My husband just got home. Hmm, I should probably go say hi.

[Guild] Teryn: your husband

[Guild] Teryn: your a girl?

[Guild] Teryn: show me ur boobies plz?

[Guild] Teryn: and then make me a sandwich

[Guild] Averik: SIGH.

Teryn has been kicked out of the guild by Averik.

The “show me your boobies” trope is a widespread phrase that indicates that the (usually male) speaker does not believe that his interlocutor is a woman without seeing a photograph of her breasts. It also insinuates that it is appropriate for someone to ask for a sexualized photograph as soon as they encounter a woman in online spaces. The “make me a sandwich” trope is a denigration of women’s rights to participate in online gaming, suggesting that they “get back in the kitchen” because, in their view, gaming is a space rightfully owned by men (recall Nardi’s construction of the “boy’s tree house”) while the kitchen is where women “belong”. This trope is one that is often heard by female gamers, as evidenced by the existence of its own tag “Sandwich Making 101”¹⁰ at the website Fat, Ugly, or Slutty¹¹, which is devoted to the shaming of people who harass women in online games.

The guild’s policy on “hate speech” extended to both Ventrilo and in-game chat. Beyond Blizzard’s game-sanctioned punishments for inappropriate language use in-game, the guild imposed its own penalties. <SeeD> had zero tolerance in the guild for any language that insults another player or group of people based on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or nationality, and the results of violating the rules were usually harsh. As shown in the chat transcript above with the player Teryn, some offenses with new or relatively unknown players resulted in immediate the removal of the player from the guild. Sometimes, a minor first offense resulted in a warning, preferably done in a mode that minimized the embarrassment of the offending party such as a one-to-one whisper in the game. However, most times a Ventrilo-based offense would be

¹⁰ <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/category/sandwich-making-101/>

¹¹ <http://www.fatuglyorslutty.com>

handled verbally in the Ventrilo channel immediately after its occurrence, breaking the politeness rule for mode usage discussed in section 5.2.2. That is, if a player in a raid used the word “gay” on Ventrilo as a synonym of undesirable, one or more officers – or even long-time guild members – would respond immediately in the same Ventrilo channel reprimanding the speaker. This was done to demonstrate publicly that the guild’s membership would not tolerate such speech, and to serve as a warning for others. Sometimes, this caused embarrassment or anger on the part of the offending party; once, a new guild member quit the guild immediately because he was so incensed that I reprimanded him for calling one of the game’s primary antagonists, the Lich King, a “fag” in Ventrilo. The public shaming spectacles were deemed appropriate for these cases of obvious violation of the rules because of the guild’s identity – the guild is a safe space and needed to demonstrate that it was against the rules to use this type of language, and doing so in a visible way was one way for the guild to show its group identity.

In the case of explicit guild rule enforcement, breaking the norm of avoiding public shame adds to the severity of the punishment. The punishment for breaking a rule is not a payment handed down by the leadership of the guild, but rather the loss of face involved in being called out for an error in a mode with participants present to witness the spectacle. At the same time, the practice reified the guild’s identity as a zero-tolerance safe space.

These rules apply to guild members as part of a community of practice, which has its own norms that are enforced regularly. Outside of the guild, however, participants still had to deal with the masculinist rhetoric and the relatively unsafe space of the larger *World of Warcraft* community that includes a larger swath of players who are not subjected to the same rules for language use as those in the guild. Any time a guild member ventured outside of the guild to do an activity, they were interacting with players outside of their community of practice, therefore

exposing themselves to types of language and conduct that would be inappropriate in the guild. It is in this setting, with anonymous players and unstated norms, that more players express the fears about interaction that are familiar from past research on *World of Warcraft*.

7.2 FEARS ABOUT TALKING ON VENTRILO

In general, the players that I interviewed from the guild did not express reservations about talking to unknown players using the text chat mode. Even aggressive players who used forms of speech prohibited in the guild seem more distant and, consequently, less threatening in the text chat mode. Reasons for this include the ability to use the built-in `/ignore` function which blocks all communication from the ignored player, as well as the lack of physical cues present in text chat which would otherwise reveal potentially remarkable identity traits.

Players do, however, express concerns and fears about interacting with unknown players in the voice chat mode. The situation in which players most often find themselves interacting with unknown others is during *pick-up-groups*, or collections of otherwise unrelated players which most often form for the purpose of raids. Even in pick-up-groups, or PUGs, use of Ventrilo is almost universally required; if there is not a guild hosting the event, many times no set rules are in place for conduct beyond the most basic gaming norms (such as being the correct level to participate in the event, knowing how to perform the tasks associated with your role, and not stealing loot from other PUG members). Beyond these minimal *World of Warcraft*-wide norms, conduct can vary widely; players can abide by similar rules that <SeeD> has in place (often resulting in that player being asked to fill-in for guild raids) or they can be aggressive and unpleasant.

One consequence of the connection between Ventrilo and raiding is the discomfort (and even the exclusion) of women who participate in raids when it comes to talking on voice chat. As described in the previous chapter, in Nardi's study women were often subjected to varying degrees of sexist treatment on voice chat, as extreme as being denied membership in hardcore raiding guilds because women's voices could "distract" the men. For these reasons, women are often reported as being afraid to speak on Ventrilo for fear of being 'discovered' as a woman and subjected to unwanted treatment. In <SeeD>, being a woman was not an unusual trait and unfavorable remarks about women were not permitted; however, women still encountered unwanted treatment outside of the guild where they were not protected by the guild's rules for interaction. The four women interviewed for this study expressed some reservations about speaking on Ventrilo with people who were not in their guild, and all of them involved interacting with men. Haley expressed that she was uncomfortable talking on Ventrilo outside of the guild because of "creepy guys":

LBC: Has there ever been a circumstance for you in which you were reluctant to use voice chat?

Haley: I don't think I have so far. Um, I think there's been a few times where I've been in a random PUG and it was a joke -- not a bad joke or anything but I was just joked about like "Oh, it's a girl!" or something like that, you know, but it was never a way that made me uncomfortable, I think. I don't really have too much of a qualm too, I know some people don't wanna be known as a girl because they don't wanna be looked down on as far as ability. I don't really care about that 'cause if they, you know, if they're gonna be a stickler about it I'd rather not play with them anyway.

[laughing] But I probably wouldn't willingly talk on voice with people outside of our guild, either, unless, say, I knew them and they were friends or something like that.

LBC: Why not, do you think? Why wouldn't you be willing to talk to strangers?

Haley: I think it depends on the situation, I think for me as a girl there's definitely the factor of there's some creepy guys out there. [laugh] And I don't wanna deal with that at all, or even be put in that situation, and so it'd be easier just to chat first on text with them for a while.

Haley describes a multimodal strategy for deciding whether another person outside of the guild is safe to talk to on Ventrilo – by chatting with them in the text chat mode first. The text chat mode is safer, and avoids the use of the voice which would reveal her gender, and by using that mode she can avoid being “put in that situation” of interacting with “creepy guys” – presumably those who would make inappropriate comments about women. She does note that this strategy is in place only for those “outside of our guild” – guild regulations are in place that protect her from unwanted interactions inside of the guild, which makes her feel safer using Ventrilo.

Eversoul, an officer of <SeeD> with far-reaching connections on the server, expressed a similar sentiment to Haley. She describes her first interactions on Ventrilo and how she was shy to talk at first because she did not know anyone in the raid group, but also that she felt that the others were surprised that she was a female. During her interview, we commiserated about the awkwardness of being on Ventrilo in a group of men.

LBC: So why, why did you choose not to talk on Ventrilo at first?

Eversoul: Because I didn't really know anybody. When I started playing, all I knew was Vitaly, so it took a little while to sort out names and voices and things like that.

LBC: So was it just that the people were unfamiliar to you or were you, well, you're a girl, too, and my first experience using Ventrilo I jumped on and it was all guys and it was kinda weird. I felt like I was the only girl. Have you ever had an experience anything like that?

Eversoul: Yeah, it was a little weird being the only girl, but it somehow didn't surprise me. I don't think that was why I didn't talk, I think it was just because I didn't really know anybody else just yet.

LBC: How did they react to you being a female? Was it just like no big deal, or did they make a big deal out of it or comment on it in any way?

Eversoul: They didn't really make a big deal out of it. I guess when I first started going on runs with Apathy [another guild] and being in their chat program, some of them were surprised that I was a girl.

LBC: Like in that they thought - they had thought previously that you were a guy or that they were just surprised that there was a girl in general?

Eversoul: Probably both, because I don't think they - I think they have one female player and she never speaks in Vent. [laugh] And other than that they don't really run into too many female players, I guess.

LBC: So how did they react when you talked on Vent?

Eversoul: It was just general surprise and the standard line that 'girls don't play WoW'.

Eversoul's experience is similar to that of most of the participants in this study – she was reluctant to use voice chat with unknown others, but felt more comfortable once she interacted with the raid members regularly. Eversoul expressed more reservations about making connections with unknown other players via RealID, because exchanging RealID contacts involves exchanging real names and e-mail addresses.

Laira's experience with voice chat started differently than the other participants because her early experiences with voice chat involved the activity of roleplaying. In her interview, she described her history of voice chat usage and its connection to the in-game activities of raiding and roleplaying. She commented that the voice chat experience at first was “overwhelming” during raids, but that it was also a strange experience using voice chat during roleplaying:

LBC: What about like your first experience using Vent?

Laira: Um my first thing that I actually used was TeamSpeak. [...] TeamSpeak is ungodly and the worst thing I've ever heard in my life. In retrospect it was so weird because there was like, I kid you not, a hundred people on there and it was the most overwhelming thing ever. And I get really bad migraines and everything else and so to have 100 people all trying to talk at once and then to have this angry woman and this very angry man and all these other angry men yelling? It was the most ridiculous thing ever. So actually when I first got on Ventrilo it was really nice because I was in this RP [roleplaying] guild and nobody wanted to talk, like there was no talking. And whenever they did talk they just talked in character and it was the most hysterical thing I've actually ever experienced in my life. I

actually did not talk on Ventrilo probably until like the end of BC [Burning Crusade, the first World of Warcraft expansion].

LBC: What was it like to talk in character on Ventrilo?

Laira: I just avoided talking in or out of character. I would just be like “oh it's running away”. “Oh so and so has died”. “Oh so and so is being attacked”. “Oh I appear to be hurt”. “Oh I need to take a rest”. And I would just be as careful as I could about the entire thing because it just felt like the most ridiculous thing ever.

Laira's discomfort came from the disconnect between using her voice to speak as her roleplayed character, which is not a common practice in roleplaying communities. Roleplaying was typically done in text, and the player's voice was never required to portray the character. Laira's biggest issue came not from her own portrayal of her character, but with interacting with other players when their voices did not match the character they were playing:

Laira: I'm sorry but like this person is a man playing a woman and being like “don't make fun of my voice”. Sorry, you're a man playing a woman, like, how am I not supposed to laugh at you? It was pretty ridiculous.

LBC: To hear the guys trying to portray women in character, was that jarring for your roleplaying experience?

Laira: It was really jarring because -- being in an immersive RP guild it was really bizarre -- because I know that at one point in the RP all the girls had split up because there was some guy who was trying to split apart all the women and turn them against each other and I was like "well three of you are men so I feel a little weird about this. Just very very strange about all

of this so I don't really know if I want to hang out with you because it feels kind of not like you're being what was advertised". Like, kind of strange for me, like "you're definitely a very manly man and I can hear your NASCAR sounds in the background". It's a little strange.

LBC: Did that change your perception of the character they were trying to portray?

Laira: It definitely did. Like he was playing a butch lesbian warrior and after that all I could picture was her running around with a NASCAR hat and a beer in her hand. The rest of the time, any time I interacted with her it completely ruined it for me. And before that I thought it was somebody trying to do something really different and I was like "wow this lady doing this is actually pretty cool" and it was like nope, this is a man who just doesn't want to admit that he rolled a female character and is now in an RP guild.

In this example, the supposed gender of the characters based on the visual mode and the text chat mode contradicted the information being obtained about gender in the voice chat mode, and the rules of the guild required players to operate regularly within this contradiction. This goes against pervasive norms about gender in this medium, specifically that a player's voice indicates gender, and therefore the roleplaying guild required a suspension of disbelief on the part of its members that was difficult for Laira to achieve.¹² For Laira, her use of voice chat was awkward before the time that she joined <SeeD>. In her first guild, which used TeamSpeak, it was because

¹² This very experience is the reason that most roleplaying guilds do not have an active voice chat roleplaying component. Most roleplaying guilds use voice chat only for out-of-character conversations.

of the large number of people (all men except for one “angry woman”) who were behaving in an aggressive way that was permitted by the guild’s rules and leadership; in her second guild, the roleplaying guild, the guild’s rules stated that all players must act as their character, even on voice chat when their voice obviously mismatched the character in some way (such as gender). Because of these past experience, Laira expressed reservations about using voice chat outside of guilds that had regulations in place about conduct on Ventrilo (both <SeeD> and a similar guild she was part of).

Mindy was the only player who did not mention having reservations about revealing herself as a woman on Ventrilo – however, Mindy’s situation was different, as she often played with friends who she knew from outside of the game (such as college friends and coworkers). This was especially the case in the guild they were in before joining <SeeD>, which was called <Refugees> and was led by her husband, Walter. When she did not play with those who already knew her, she was widely known as “Walter’s wife” which revealed her gender. She expressed discomfort with this situation:

Mindy: [...] because I played with {Walter} most of the time, people knew we were married so they knew I was a girl from the beginning. I did sometimes get this 'oh you're a girl this is why you suck' kind of vibe. And I got it actually more from my real life friends than I did from my online friends. Most of my online friends were really willing to talk to me and help me figure out [how to play], they didn't seem to care what my gender was, just they genuinely felt like they wanted to help me be a better player. But a lot of my friends in real life, they were either too afraid to say anything to me at first especially or later on they were like well, you

know, you're just {Walter}'s wife, that's why you go with us to things. And that happened a lot in <Refugees> because most of those people were comprised of real life people.

LBC: Did that offend you? That 'oh you're {Walter}'s wife' thing?

Mindy: Yeah. And it was another reason I wanted to server transfer, because I wanted people to see me as myself and not just {Walter}'s wife. And even though we came together, I really feel like the people in <SeeD> were more willing to take me to things, were more willing to talk to me when I was online alone when {Walter} was at work or whatever. Because {Walter} and I don't have very similar schedules so I would be online a lot when he wasn't and vice versa. So I didn't want people to see me just as his wife and that was a big problem in <Refugees>.

Mindy's status not only as a woman, but also in a particular position in life (being married to the leader of the guild), afforded her a different kind of treatment than the average guild member, or even the average woman in *World of Warcraft*. She was given special privileges and allowed to attend events since she was connected to a powerful guild member, but at the same time she was coddled and her development as a player suffered for it. She felt differently when they changed servers and joined <SeeD>, not only because she was in a guild with new people, but those new people did not know her as just "Walter's wife".

Outside of <SeeD>, women operated with assumptions based on their experience with the larger *World of Warcraft* speech community and its masculinist rhetoric. While the guild as a discourse community existed with its own rules that allowed for women to feel safe interacting with others, in the larger medium these rules were not always in place. Whether it is avoiding

talking altogether in voice chat, as Haley and Eversoul remarked, or discomfort with the implications of one's identity in another guild's rules, such as Laira's and Mindy's experience, women feel that they are required to navigate the interactional and multimodal landscape carefully in order to avoid undesirable treatment in the community.

Not only women have this issue, however; other identity groups are subject to unwanted treatment. One of the other groups that appeared in the guild quite frequently, and which was remarked upon explicitly in several interviews, was "young people", generally used to refer to people under the age of 18. While not as potentially malicious or threatening as the treatment of women could be, young people also had to deal with a host of issues regarding their treatment and their age which was exacerbated by using voice chat.

7.3 VENTRILO AND AGE

World of Warcraft is often characterized degradingly as being a haven for teenagers with "no lives", and young people are generally thought of as more immature and less competent players in the game community.¹³ However, some people in this age group do not conform to the stereotype and find themselves in the position of having to "prove" themselves to be competent despite their age.

The difficulties with age did not rest solely on the shoulders of the young people themselves; often times, having a younger person in the company of adults caused discomfort and tension which exposed the value of 'real life' in online friendships. In this section, I will

¹³ See http://theoatmeal.com/comics/online_gaming for an example.

describe not only how younger people oriented towards their behavior in the community, but how the rest of the community oriented towards the young people. This shared space for people of all ages taught everyone valuable lessons.

7.3.1 **Autoethnographic interlude: The adoption of Chromus.**

After a raid late at night in January 2009, I am hanging out with two of my guildmates in Ventrilo, chatting about our new equipment that we got that evening. “I don’t like this new sword,” I say.

“It’s such a good upgrade though, why don’t you like it?” asks fifteen-year-old Chromus.

“It’s stupid looking,” I reply. “And ridiculously phallic.”

There is a pause, and I figure it’s because the guys are looking at the sword to see what I mean. “Wait, Ska,” Chromus says after a moment, “What does ‘phallic’ mean?”

Silence ensues on Ventrilo. Suddenly I feel embarrassed, wondering how I had forgotten that Chromus is our youngest guild member, and might not know the meaning of this word. This sudden revelation causes instant awkwardness. What is the appropriate way to answer this question? Chromus’s age had not really been a problem for me before – he always conducted himself in a very mature manner, and although he occasionally had to disappear in the middle of a raid because his mother was yelling at him to go to bed on a school night, I had never had such a direct encounter with the social pressures of dealing with a young person in *World of Warcraft*. I quickly contemplate how to delicately phrase the definition of that word in a way that might not make me look salacious or cause a never-ending fit of giggles. Every thought I have gets me laughing at how ridiculous it is that I am suddenly trying to censor myself when the thought had never crossed my mind before.

“Yeah Ska,” teases Jahaerys, the other participant in the Ventrilo channel. “What *does* that mean?”

I figure Jahaerys, who I know is twenty years old, is just goading me. “Why don’t *you* explain it, Dule?” I suggest, barely able to contain my laughter.

“Come on guys,” Chromus pleads, although I can hear the mirth in his tone.

“I would love to,” Jahaerys responds, “but I don’t think I know what it means.”

I depress my Push-to-Talk key and make a noise of exasperation. Then I press the Enter key in *World of Warcraft* to open the chat box, and type a private message to Jahaerys.

You whisper: Are you kidding me?

Jahaerys whispers: No! I’ve heard it before – PROBABLY FROM YOU – but I don’t know what it means.

You whisper: OMG [Oh My God]

You whisper: Something being phallic means it looks like a penis.

Jahaerys: LOL OMG

“Well Chromus,” Jahaerys says over Ventrilo after a pause, obviously barely able to speak the words coherently through his amusement. “Ska says it means that it looks like a penis.”

“Oh my god,” Chromus replies, laughing quite loudly over Ventrilo. “Well, I feel smart, now I’m going to use that word all the time.”

“Don’t tell *anybody* where you got that from, especially not your mother,” I warn Chromus, although I can hardly contain my laughter at the sound of levity in Chromus’s voice.

“No worries,” Chromus replies almost instantly, “I’ll just say I found it on the Internet.”

“No, don’t do that!” Jahaerys chimes in, “Then you’ll be banned for another week and you won’t be able to raid.”

“Oh I see how it is,” Chromus teases, “You guys only love me for my raid spot.”

“Was there ever any question?” Jahaerys replies. “Besides, loving you for any other reason is illegal in my state.”

This topic is veering wildly out of my control, but I let the boys continue their banter as I go back to upgrading my gear in the game. I use Skakavaz’s jewelcrafting skills to cut an in-game gem that I can affix to my new phallic sword to add extra spellpower. “You’d love me if I was your brother or something,” I hear Chromus say a few moments later. “Or Ska could be my mom!”

“No way, I’m not old enough to be your mom,” I reply, suddenly pulled back into the conversation. I mentally calculate the years between us -- eleven. “Well, I guess it’s technically possible, although—“

Chromus cuts me off. “You could still adopt me!” A pause. “Ska, you should be my honorary mom. You’re *already* practically my guild mom.”

“Yes, because I teach you such amazing things like what *phallic* means,” I reply, “such a responsible adult I am.”

“No, you guys are totally my role models. J’s in *college* and Ska you’re a *professor*.” I don’t bother to correct him – that is a battle I’ve fought and lost – and the admiration in his voice is difficult to resist. “You guys are doing what I want to do in life. *And* you’d never ban me from the computer, I bet,” Chromus insists.

“That last part’s true, anyway,” I reply, “J would kill me if we had to replace you in a raid.”

“See, Chromus?” Jahaerys interjects, “We’d still only love you for your DPS.”

“Yes, but at least I’d still get to play, and you’d believe me when I said I can play and get my homework done, because you guys do it all the time.” Chromus’s voice sounds a little bit serious now, like he is envisioning a different set of circumstances for himself. “*And* you wouldn’t tell me I’m too young to talk to random people on the Internet. You guys know what’s really important.”

“Yeah, like gems,” Jahaerys says, defusing the seriousness of the conversation. “Speaking of which, Ska, can you make me an attack power gem?”

As I prepare Jahaerys’s gem, I find myself wondering what Chromus means about knowing “what’s really important” – does he mean having space to play games in his life? Learning the balance between work and leisure? Making friends because you share commonalities beyond age group and physical location? I realize that there is a lot to learn for a person of any age by playing a complex, social game like *World of Warcraft*. This was also the point that I realized that young people do face issues with their identity in the game, and prompted me to investigate the ways that young people in the community interact with multimodal resources.

7.3.2 Learning life skills through interaction.

Chromus, my virtual adopted son, and another young man, Kovax, stand out from my ethnography as examples of the role of teenagers in the game community. These two young people share many similarities: they both started playing *World of Warcraft* at age 14, and continued to play until age 18, when they each temporarily quit playing in order to focus on college and employment. They both joined <SeeD> after being part of other guilds and stayed in

<SeeD> for years. Both of them held officer positions in the guild , and they both remarked in their interviews about how playing *World of Warcraft* taught them valuable life skills. One marked difference between Chromus and Kovax was in their voices. Chromus never had a young-sounding voice – as far as I can remember, the pitch and quality of his voice always resembled those of the older male players in the guild. Chromus revealed himself as a young person through the content of his talk – his mother would often revoke his computer access in the middle of events, and he referred to having to “go to school in the morning”. Kovax, on the other hand, sounded very much like a teenager when he first joined. In addition to content that revealed his age similar to Chromus, his voice was high pitched, and throughout the course of the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion his voice often cracked as he was going through the vocal changes that occur during puberty. Many times, other players would jokingly make fun of Kovax for his voice.

Both of these young men described the challenges of being a young person playing *World of Warcraft*. Kovax described the “censorship” that he felt was happening in the groups he had been part of, and how he realized that his fellow players were purposefully avoiding interaction with him because he was so much younger than them. In his interview, he described how he came to realize that others were holding back around him, and the conflict that he felt over whether such self-censorship was necessary or not.

Kovax:One of the officers in [my first guild] told me that I couldn't raid with them anymore because I went AFK [away from keyboard] too long too much and when I explained to her that it was because of my diabetes she basically told me that she didn't give a fuck. Excuse the language but that's

what she told me. She was like 'that's not an excuse and you take up our precious raid time' and things like that.

And that's when I kinda really started lookin back at how they talked to me and I realized it was -- there were certain people that never talked to me and I realized it was because they couldn't censor themselves what they said to me and they kinda felt like they needed to because I was a lot younger than them.

LBC: Do you think that's a problem with being a young person playing this game?

Kovax: I do in some parts. I think that there are some things where um: some things need to be said. They don't need to be censored, they just need to be put out there and if the person doesn't understand it then that's something that they need to work through. And that you just kinda need to say "Okay, well maybe later they'll understand and then we can come back to it", or just drop it as a whole until they understand and bring it back up again. I think as a whole that the people censoring themselves around younger people -- it's necessary in some situations because I think that if you don't censor yourself sometimes they're gonna hear something that they don't wanna hear, they're gonna hear something that you didn't WANT them to hear. And you didn't realize that, you're just you know shootin' the shit, and you're gonna say something that you're gonna end up regretting. Some people even feel bad about saying some of these things because it was to a younger person

For Kovax, some measure of regulation of talk in interaction was necessary to avoid embarrassment, and he noticed that those who did not censor themselves did not interact with him when he was younger. For Chromus, there were other issues – particularly involving leadership questions in game situations – where he felt that his age was a detriment. In describing his experience having disagreements with guild members, Chromus felt that he was often disregarded because of his status as a young person.

Chromus: I do remember at first I wanted to be officer or a higher rank in the guild and I knew I didn't get it because of my age. [...] I remember many raid nights where I had one view while another officer had another view and they would always end up poorly for me because they were a higher ranking officer. [The other players] didn't value my opinion very highly because of my age. And I think that was also one of the big things was my opinion wasn't valued because of my age at that point.

Negotiating the social construction of age and responsibility was one of the primary difficulties that both Kovax and Chromus reported in their interviews. For both of them, their voice was a primary resource that they could use to reinforce their authority. Kovax recalled his experience in another guild that had an age requirement for membership, specifically that raiders had to be eighteen years old. He managed to gain membership in the guild when he was seventeen and raid with them without revealing his age, relying on his behavior to convince the others that he was a good fit for their group. The fact that his voice had changed by that age also served as an asset to him that he could use to portray himself as mature enough for the guild.

Kovax: I joined a guild on another server, kinda dual-raiding, and you had to be eighteen in this guild. But a lot of people there didn't know me, and [at

that time] I didn't sound seventeen. You know, I didn't act seventeen, so I could get away with it. I'm the kind of person that I'm not gonna tell you right off the bat how old I am, but if you ask I'm not gonna lie to you.

Chromus talked about similar strategies. According to Chromus, he “didn't start using voice over IP until after [he] had hit puberty”, so because of his voice many other players assumed him to be older than he was. In some cases, especially when his age was not already known to the other interlocutors, Chromus used his older-sounding voice on Ventrilo to his advantage.

LBC: Would you ever use [your voice] to your advantage? Like to, you know, not tell people how old you were or to have people think you were more mature than you may have been?

Chromus: Yes actually, because when I did have -- actually in any situation where I've had a leadership role, whether it was in <SeeD> or in any other gaming community I'm a part of now, or leading a team in arenas in 5v5 [player-versus-player competitions] -- having a sense of authority because of age helps the other people listen to you and take you more seriously. You know, a group of 19 year olds wouldn't want to be getting told what to do by a 15 year old. HOWEVER they probably would be okay listening to a 17 or 18 year old if that 17 or 18 year old was knowledgeable on the subject.

Instead of lying about their age, these two players used the sound of their voice – accessible with the voice chat mode – to portray themselves as a more mature player. This was their way of avoiding the issue of other players treating them differently because of their age. With voice chat being a mode that is regularly used in most raiding-centric guilds and in many raiding scenarios,

Chromus had an advantage in that mode of being perceived as older than his biological age, and Kovax also took advantage of this voice quality when he acquired it. This allowed them to fit in with groups that may have denied them membership based on their age.

In <SeeD>, it was widely known that both of these players were younger because they were members of the guild for several years and became close friends with many guild members. In some cases, the concept of age is erased in online contexts, and while the players may know that some of their interlocutors are younger or older, it becomes easy to forget when you are interacting with only their voice and their actions rather than their appearance. I had this experience in such interactions like the one described in the autoethnographic interlude above. Kovax described a similar experience when talking about his friendship with Page, who he considers to be one of his “closest friends”, and how he found out after several years of friendship that there is an age difference of more than twenty years between them:

LBC: What about some other identity aspects, whether or not gender, but like age - have you ever like, expected somebody to be younger-?

Kovax: Okay

LBC: And they were, they turned out to be older than y-?

Kovax: Literally three weeks ago, {PAGE}, I had NO idea, LITERALLY none, like, I'm sitting here thinking he's TWENTY-two.

LBC: Just from his voice, or how'd you know?

Kovax: Just from his voice, and the way he's talked to me, you know, the way we talk to each other, I'm thinking, "Oh, he's cool, he's kinda young," and you know the way he tells me about his high school, 'cause I, I'm in high school so we talk about it a lot. And I'm like,

"oh, well he remembers a lot, so it must have been recent." But then the other day he's talkin' about, I've, I totally forget what kicked this off, but then he said something and I'm like, "wait, what?" I was like, "How OLD are you, {Page}?" and he's like, "Dude, I'm almost forty-one." I'm just sittin' like LITERALLY, I'm just li-like, in Vent I'm just sittin' there like "What? No, no you're not, you're lying to me, I'm on, I'm on Punk'd." Like I honestly had no idea, I did not know at all.

Page described his experience of this event as well from the other side. While Page always knew that Kovax was much younger than him, he did not consider that to be an issue in their friendship because of the way Kovax acted more maturely than is expected of someone his age. He too found the revelation to be amusing, not disturbing.

Page: {Kovax}'s not a normal kid, for one, at least -- like I work with a lot of kids his age, so it's maybe easier for me to talk to him. What I love most about {Ko} is like, he's not afraid to give me shit for anything, it just kinda cracks me up.

LBC: Did {Ko} always know that you were much older than him?

Page: Actually no, he knew I was older, but, this actually just happened like a little over a month ago, it was after a raid one night and [...] I don't know if we were talking about like music we listened to in high school or whatever, at some point it dawned on him that I was actually probably almost as old as his dad, and he was just sitting in Vent going like, "oh, OH, oh that makes sense now, oh!" He was just like stupefied for like five minutes, it was really kinda funny. But he hasn't really reacted differently since he's learned that, which is really cool.

This is not to say that the concept of age is totally erased in <SeeD>; on the contrary, while it is easy to forget that there may be a wide range of ages in one's group, sometimes the issue surfaces at unexpected times. Most of the time, however, with guild members these issues were more humorous than detrimental. Chromus described the incident from section 7.3.1 in the following way during his interview, amidst much laughter.

Chromus: Um I know that certain things would be held back from me, because I was younger? Like certain explanation of words like I think people felt more awkward to explain them because I was young. Like I remember a situation where you didn't want to explain what the word "phallic" mean to me.

LBC: Oh man. [laughing]

Chromus: Yeah that's about it though.

LBC: I did explain the word phallic to you though, if I recall correctly. And you were like [imitates Chromus] "oh I know what this word means now".

Chromus: [laughs] I recall it that you didn't want to and you told you instructed {Jahaerys} to explain it to me instead while you were just laughing in the background at the time.

LBC: The first - the funny thing about that was that I had to explain to {Jahaerys} what it means before he could explain it to you.

Chromus: [teasing voice] Yeah so in truth be told it did stem from you, the definition did stem from you.

The phallic incident was the first time that I became aware of how younger people were actually treated in the game. I knew that younger people were often seen as immature – I had said so

myself on a number of occasions – but there were a lot of subtle things, like self-censoring that either was or was not done, that I had never thought about before. Did it matter, whatever is or is not appropriate for people of a certain age? Chromus could have lied to me about his age, even though he never did – but if he had not told me, and behaved the way he always did, would I have known? He was a very competent raider, could focus and solve problems, told humorous jokes, and knew more about the mathematics of in-game statistics and abilities than I did. Did he not deserve to be treated the same way a 21-year-old or a 40-year-old with this same maturity? My own reaction to the phallic incident was a small crisis, wondering about whether the relative anonymity of the Internet freed us from these concerns of the ‘real world’ like censoring ourselves around young people. These questions that I had as an adult player, as well as the treatment that Chromus and Kovax both describe in their process of coming of age in *World of Warcraft*, point to the fact that a physical world characteristic like age is a very real concern for online communities – and the ways that people talk to get around those concerns, as well as the resources (like the sound of their voice) that they use, is an intriguing site for further study.

Age, like gender, is an identity trait that can be carried by the voice and communicated to others using voice chat. Sometimes this is problematic – a young-sounding voice can lead to immediate judgments of character and playing ability – yet other times, the voice can conceal age and lead to cross-generational friendships that would not have been likely in other situations. Players are aware of the connotations of a young age, and negotiate these indexicalities in ongoing interaction. For young male players, their voice usually changes to sound more mature; some other qualities do not change, and the implications of using those varieties are much more permanent. One of these unchangeable characteristics is language variety.

7.4 VOICE AND LANGUAGE VARIETY

In the previous section, I have discussed how age is a physical characteristic that can affect the quality of a person's voice, and how knowledge of a fellow player's age can impact the types of interaction had with that player. The variety of language spoken by a player can reveal identity aspects as well, which can result in similar conflicts in game-related interactions. In this section, I will discuss two varieties that appeared in the community during my ethnography: non-native English, and gay-sounding speech. These varieties have something in common -- they are easily heard in the voice of the player because of phonology or lexical choices, but not always so easily observed in the typed text. Each of these varieties carried with it some identity issues that players had to negotiate, and these identity issues were tied in to *World of Warcraft*-related cultural concerns. While many speakers of gay-sounding varieties code-switched when in uncertain company, non-native speakers did not often have that ability; therefore, these two groups faced different consequences of using their varieties in the community.

7.4.1 Non-native English

First, I will discuss non-native English speakers. In <SeeD>, there have been many non-native English speaking members who have come and gone; however, one non-native English speaker, Mork, was a prominent member of the guild during the years 2008-2009, and his experience as a native Mandarin Chinese speaker reveals one particular consequence of language variety in *World of Warcraft* culture. Mork was from mainland China living in the United States while going to a university. I met him through Paetrik as they had played many games together throughout their friendship. Mork's non-native English was quite evident when speaking on

Ventrilo, sometimes to the extent that I could not understand the message that he was trying to convey. I will not go into an extensive grammatical and phonological analysis of Mork's speech, but upon hearing him talk on Ventrilo it was almost universally remarked upon that he was clearly not a native speaker of English; furthermore, the particular variety of non-native English that Mork spoke was easily identifiable as Chinese, especially since Mork was proud of his heritage and often mentioned going "home" to China to visit his family during University breaks.

As Dibbell (2007) and Nakamura (2009) have both discussed, the racialization of labor in gaming communities like *World of Warcraft* has led to a commonly-held association between ethnically Chinese players of the game and the prohibited and stigmatized practices of gold farming and hacking. This has led to a conflation between the Chinese ethnicity and a style of play referred to as "Chinese", similar to that which was observed by Steinkuehler (2006) in the game *Lineage II* and which contributed to animosity between Asian and American players in that game (209). This conflation of ethnicity and play style was problematic for Chinese players in *World of Warcraft*, who often resented being reduced to the status of "gold farmer" because of their ethnicity. Because of this, some Chinese players choose to remain on Chinese language servers, although they are less populated and game content is released much later in China due to government regulations, because they are less likely to encounter these stereotypes.

Mork experienced this often, and particularly voiced protestations against members of the guild sharing a player-made music video called "Ni Hao" about Chinese players as gold farmers¹⁴. Mork told me once in November of 2008:

Mork whispers: its not funny !! i don't even want to talk
anymore

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dkkf5NEIo0>

Mork whispers: everytime someone talks to me on vent, they say, oh your Chinese?

Mork whispers: and i say yes...

Mork whispers: and they say " you hear about that ni hao song" and ask me a question about like how to make money

Mork whispers: like they think i'm some gold farmer... so annoying !!

The association between his language variety and gold farming was so problematic for Mork that he refrained from speaking on Ventrilo to anyone except those he already considered his friends. He rarely if ever spoke in raid contexts, and over time, Mork became increasingly cut off from the social life of the guild because of his avoidance of Ventrilo. Finally, he quit playing *World of Warcraft*, citing his "lack of friends" and the "stupidity of people" as his reasons for quitting.

Mork's experience shows how players live the stereotypes about Chinese players in online games. The casual connection made between Chinese players and the stigmatized gold farming practice affected his choice of mode usage, and eventually his ability to create and maintain friendships in the game environment. While he was certainly forthcoming with his identity in casual speech, most often the first clue to players about Mork's Chinese identity was the variety of language he spoke. This variety indexed a particular group of people, namely gold farmers, who were often the subject of jokes in *World of Warcraft* fan culture. This indexical chain was problematic for Mork, starting with something he could not change – the way he spoke in the voice chat mode. His spoken language variety was the source of the problem, and to avoid the source he chose to stop using Ventrilo for casual social interaction. Because he avoided Ventrilo, he missed much of the social interaction that happened there, causing him to feel left out and like he had a "lack of friends". Eventually, through loneliness, he quit the game and left

the community altogether. The pressure to use Ventrilo in the community interacts with stereotypes about identity to create an unwelcoming environment for Mork, and this experience is purportedly quite common for native Mandarin speakers in the English speaking game community.

7.4.2 Gay-sounding speech

Gay-sounding speech is not one particular way of sounding “gay”; rather, it is a collection of cues in a speaker’s style that may point to one of many different ways of being gay (Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler, 2001). Some of these cues include durations of onset /s/ and /l/ (Crist 1997), fundamental frequency properties of stressed vowels (Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers 2003), and hyperarticulation, especially voice onset time of voiceless aspirated stops and release of word-final stops (Barrett 1997). Speakers and hearers are cognizant of these properties and associate these features with a general style that is attributed to gay men.

Being a gay man, or sounding like one, is highly problematic in a masculinist culture like that which exists in *World of Warcraft*. Even in a safe space guild like <SeeD>, speakers went to great lengths to avoid being cast as gay if they did not personally identify that way. Even in close-knit communities of friends with a welcoming attitude to non-heterosexual people, sexuality was a highly relevant concern in terms of personal identity portrayal. Owen, a self-identified heterosexual male, often spoke with very precise articulation (connected to hyperarticulation associated with gay sounding speech) and expressed concerns about his character’s armor matching in color (a topic stereotypically associated with gay sounding speech). Because he spoke with this particular style, Owen received some teasing about his

sexuality based on the sound of his voice. While most of these comments were made in Ventrilo, I have records of them occurring in text chat, such as:

[Guild] Theon: There you go again, J, obsessing over how faaaaabulouss your armor is.

And Owen even remarked on it a few times in text chat.

[Party] Jahaerys: He asked if I was gay, lol.

[Party] Jahaerys: Because my voice is soft or something? IDK

I even remember making some of these comments myself, especially when I first met Owen, about how articulate he was and the expressive dynamics of his voice.

At times, this teasing was extended to his roommate Matt (who also identified himself as a heterosexual male), usually because one of them would utter a phrase that could be willfully misconstrued such as “it’s our bedtime”. Both men found these remarks to be problematic and they actually issued a request to the guild to stop making remarks about their sexuality. To illustrate, I present an excerpt from my field notes dated May 11th, 2009, which details one such interaction and its aftermath.

5/11/2009: Uncomfortable interaction tonight. Owen and Matt, roommates, laugh and joke about themselves all the time, especially about the awkwardness that is dormitory life. Tonight after the raid, Owen said over Vent to Matt “we should get to bed early” because they had an exam in their early morning class the next day. I wasn’t really listening because I was having a conversation in whisper with Theon at the time, and someone else made a smart remark about Owen making Matt’s sleeping schedule for him. I misheard and made some flippant comment, trying to be funny, about how cute it was that they were on the same schedule. This was a big mistake; Matt reacted immediately, saying “I’m sick of these comments about us being gay, it’s not funny.” He

logged off of Ventrilo immediately after that, which made me think he was upset because he didn't even say goodnight. I asked Owen to tell Matt that I didn't mean to insinuate anything about his sexuality, I was just trying to be funny. Owen replied "Okay, I will. He's so sensitive about that. It was funny before but after a while it gets a bit much." I decided to contact Matt directly too and not just go through Owen, because it feels insincere to apologize indirectly -- so I sent him a text apologizing and saying that I was just trying to be funny, and he said "I'm not mad, it just makes me feel weird lol". I figure that they are both young men, and even the implication of non-heterosexuality is a threat to them. Cool solidarity -- close but not too close, right?

This event, one of a few like it, illustrates a few points. First, there are two particularly interesting insights about the usage of the Ventrilo mode and its norms for interaction and relationship maintenance. This excerpt is an example of how easy it is to be distracted when interacting in multiple modes at once, as demonstrated by my simultaneous conversation in “whisper”, or private messages in *World of Warcraft*, with another player while I was listening to conversation on Ventrilo. Additionally, this excerpt shows how the sudden closing of a channel – Matt signing off of Ventrilo without saying goodnight – can be interpreted to have meaning beyond the act of closing a channel, specifically that he was angry because he did not engage in the expected conversational closing behavior. As an extension of this observation, I decided to open another channel – that of the text message – to send my apology to Matt as a way to show the sincerity of my sentiment. The act of opening or closing a channel, as Scollon (1999) has suggested, does interactional work beyond that which is done in the content of the message itself.

Matt closed the Ventrilo channel in a way that indicated his anger; I opened the text message channel to indicate sincerity.

Finally, and more pertinently to the topic at hand, both men's responses indicate that they engaged in continual assertion of their heterosexuality. This is part of an idealized American masculinity that includes enough distance between male friends to imply closeness, but not romantic involvement – in other words, being close, but not too close (Kiesling 2004). Owen's remark that the comments were funny but eventually got to be "a bit much" indicates that these kinds of jokes are not unheard of or taboo, but that frequent use of these jokes is undesirable – or, in Matt's words, can make a person "feel weird". They were being ascribed an identity that they do not associate with themselves. Being used to a society which assumes heterosexuality, they both felt uncomfortable having to do social and interactional work that they did not normally have to do in order to overtly assert their heterosexuality. This situation did not arise solely from the willful misinterpretation of comments, but also from the features in Owen's speaking style which could also be associated with gay-sounding speech.

Neither Owen nor Matt identified themselves as non-heterosexual, and they both still negotiated the issues surrounding non-heterosexual identities in the community. Those players who did identify as gay and who also spoke a variety of English that carried elements of gay-sounding speech had a different task at hand – while Owen and Matt attempted to assert their heterosexuality, gay players often felt uncomfortable revealing their sexuality, although they usually avoided having to do so. For those players who did identify as gay, they often felt, as Theon remarked, "like a unicorn" because they were so rare and thought to be nonexistent by most members of the *World of Warcraft* population. Theon had features of gay-sounding speech in his language variety and was often identifiable by his language variety; he described the ways

that he would not lie about his identity, but be careful about overt markers in his speech when around people he did not know.

Theon: I guess when people talk to somebody that they know is gay online they automatically assume that they're going to have the stereotypical voice, you know, like they expect me to talk like Sasha Baron Cohen's Bruno or something, and I don't, so I guess that, that, that's a surprise for some people. And then for actual ticks in the voice I suppose that there is a little bit of a lisp there but it's not completely in-your-face. [...] And as far as typing goes, no, I don't think so, only because I don't type with what we would consider to be like, female internet attributes, as far as type speech goes. Like there are no carrot faces, emoticons are basic and not used with every sentence, proper grammar and punctuation and spelling is used, so: I would say no on that one. [...] Although I make no effort to hide it, I will not outwardly say it, or say anything about it unless I'm in a situation that I deem where I'm able to do something like that. Like, say for example, I'm meeting somebody for the first time, I usually will gauge their openmindedness a little bit before I say anything.

Speakers like Theon, who used a variety of gay-sounding speech and were aware of it, often felt the need to code-switch when using Ventrilo to avoid having to deal with potential harassment from people outside of the guild who did not adhere to the guild's rule set. Those speakers like Owen, who were not aware of the ways that their verbal style may have carried some markers of gay-sounding speech, did not code-switch and encountered assumptions about their identity based on the sound of their voice.

7.5 VOICE AND IDENTITY

Most players reported the pitch of one's voice being a cue for aspects of identity. These identities usually were within pre-existing demographic categories such as gender, age, and (to a lesser extent) sexuality; these categories are the ones that have been found repeatedly in sociolinguistic literature to be the most relevant for conceptualizing the identities of one's interlocutors. Because of this, the pitch of one's voice (or the dynamic changes of pitch) is considered to be a resource for displaying identity in this community. Sometimes, this display is not wanted – the women who felt afraid of harassment after talking on Ventrilo, or the young people who were concerned about not being taken seriously – but other times, the voice can be an asset for identifying oneself. Inside the guild, treatment of women was regulated so women felt safe talking on Ventrilo; age concerns did not receive the same treatment, and so even in a guild that was so accepting of all players, young people sometimes felt discriminated against because of their age. This resulted in, eventually, a notification being put on the guild's application for new members that “no player will be denied membership based on age”; although this did not solve all of the concerns about young people raiding in the guild, it was a step towards making players like Chromus feel more welcome. With sexuality, unintentional use of gay-sounding speech by non-gay identifying men resulted in teasing that led to awkward interactions; however, the use of gay-sounding speech by a gay identified man was not considered to be problematic in most guild interactions. Outside of the guild, these safe space rules did not apply; therefore, people who felt comfortable speaking on Ventrilo in the guild often avoided use of voice chat when in groups that were made up of people from outside of the guild.

Because of the ascription of identity based on properties of one's spoken language, talking on Ventrilo is often an act done only with members of a player's guild or with those that

the player trusts, whether through interacting with them for an extended length of time in other modes and mediums or by building up rapport through interaction in the safer, more distant text chat mode. All of that which I have discussed in this chapter has centered around the portrayals of authentic identities – that is, those identities which match those held by the players in offline contexts. Online, Theon portrayed himself as a gay male, which matched his offline identity; Laira portrayed herself as a female online, even when roleplaying her characters, which was the same as the gender identity she performed offline. In most cases, players do not perform non-authentic identities, with the only exception being the context of roleplaying, in which identity shifts are desired and licensed. However, there are isolated cases of identity deception that happen within the community, and these instances illuminate how community members view authenticity and identity. In the next chapter, I will turn to discussing these cases of deception and how they show the nuances of multimodal communication and identity.

8.0 DECEPTION AND MULTIMODALITY

In the previous chapter, I wrote that many players have a strategy for interacting with unknown others: usually they begin by interacting solely by text chat until they feel comfortable with their interlocutors and trust them to a small extent. Then, they will interact on Ventrilo or another voice chat platform. After sufficient interaction on Ventrilo, players may move their friendships to offline contexts, such as sharing identifying information via the RealID friend system or adding each other as friends on Facebook. This multimodal process of friendship building is shown in Figure 11. This strategy points to a continuous building of trust among friends which can lead to a friendship that, while it began online, exists in both online and offline contexts; it also shows how mode of communication functions as a semiotic resource in building relationships.

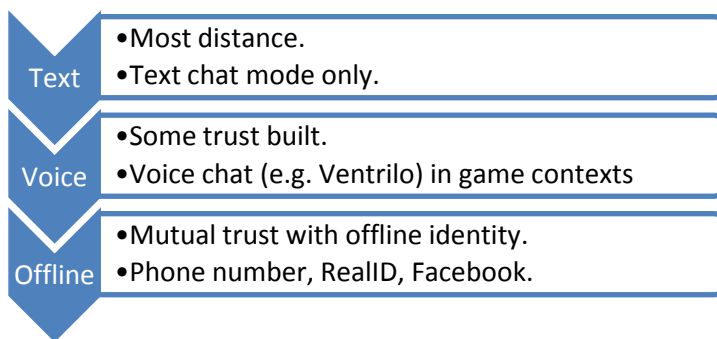


Figure 11: Multimodal process of friendship building.

In this chapter, I will show how the building of a relationship in the community can be undermined or thwarted by an individual portraying an inauthentic or deceptive identity. In

examining cases of identity deception, which number very few in my ethnography, the existence of this multimodal building of trust can be verified by observing what happens when these conventions are broken. Most of the cases that I will present in this chapter involve gender deception – specifically, physical males attempting to portray themselves as females in an online context. These cases go beyond those men who have female avatars; as I discussed in Chapter 6.0, the gender mismatch of avatar and player is licensed and accepted in this community. What I am talking about in this chapter are those who attempt to portray themselves as something they are not in an offline context – men who try to convince others that they are really women “in real life”. Producing and defending deceptive messages is an intense cognitive process, and because of the numerous cues that deceivers must attend to, they often accidentally reveal clues about their deception (Ekman 1992). In their discussion of face-to-face interaction, DePaulo and colleagues (2003) suggest these clues can take many forms in many modes. For example, a deceiver may reveal their deception through visual cues (e.g. fidgeting), verbal cues (hesitations, vocal pitch), and speech errors (slips of the tongue). Once any of these cues are perceived, other interlocutors engage in a questioning process to determine the extent of the deception (Buller and Burgoon 1996). In other mediums, the availability of these cues is reduced; Giordano and colleagues (2007) describe the decreased availability of visual cues in telephone conversations, as well as the elimination of verbal and vocal cues in text-based communication like instant messaging. Early studies in deception in CMC suggested that the lack of visual and vocal cues lead to significantly lower deception detection accuracy (e.g. Giordano and George 2005, Marett and George 2004). However, later work suggested that since meaningful interactions often take place using multiple modes and mediums, the compilation of cues in many modes may lead to better detection of deception (Giordano and Tilley 2006, Giordano et al. 2008, Cooper and Kahai

2003). However, an alternate theory suggests that the oversaturation of an interaction with information from many modes can serve to distract interlocutors from a reliable indicator of deception; in the words of George and Marett (2008):

The combination of a less rich environment and more voluminous amount of submitted information (both deceptive and otherwise) can easily drown out a lone deceiver. Unless a group member fortuitously notices a suspicious indicator or discrepancy during the conversation or has a pre-existing suspicion about one of the other members, a deceiver with a convincing story can thrive within a computer-mediated context. (301)

However, users who are highly experienced in one particular medium or channel of communication may be better able to detect deception because they have experience with similar cases and know which warning signs to look for (Carlson and Zmud 1999). Furthermore, the presence of more than two individuals allows for the sharing of suspicions and can help lead to better deception detection (Giordano 2007). In summary, while a deceiver may be able to portray an inauthentic identity in a computer-mediated context, the experienced members of a community may be able to better detect deception because they have developed strategies for doing so. In *World of Warcraft*, these strategies involve obtaining information and cues from a number of modes of communication.

In this chapter, I will deal with three specific themes of identity deception, which all show different manifestations of deception in the community. First, I will discuss a more mundane example, in which players portray an inauthentic identity in text only – sometimes intentionally, in the case of Azhure, and sometimes unintentionally, in the case of Walter – but with no intention of attempting to build a relationship with the other interlocutors based on this deceptive identity. Second, I will discuss identity deception in which the speaker employs

avoidance tactics to deceive others by avoiding the use of modes which would complicate their deception. Finally, I will discuss two instances where the intentional identity deception extended to modes beyond Ventrilo and involved large-scale deception in multiple modes. In each case, I will discuss how the deception was revealed with an eye towards the use of linguistic mode as a semiotic resource.

It is important to note the relative rarity of these occurrences in a gaming community like *World of Warcraft* – with the relative anonymity of online communication, it is theoretically possible (and, in fact, posed by authors such as Turkle 1995) that any person may be able to take on any persona they like because of the lack of physical cues. However, aside from a few isolated cases, identity deception is far from the norm in this online community – in fact, the cases depicted in this chapter represent the sum total of deceptions that I observed in my five-year ethnography, and several are from word-of-mouth only. Furthermore, those who do attempt to deceive others are usually quickly figured out through linguistic cues. Most of these cues to deception involve multimodal resources, specifically the avoidance of those modes that can reveal cues to one's identity. By analyzing these cases of deception, I do not intend to state that deception happens frequently; on the contrary, I wish to show the few cases of it that I have encountered and the strategies that participants used to see through the deception. By analyzing the aberrant behavior, the norms and expectations of interaction are revealed.

8.1 SMALL-SCALE DECEPTION IN TEXT

In this section, I will describe how players may deceive others (usually unknown players from outside of the community of practice) in text-based modes, whether they do so purposefully or

inadvertently. In describing and analyzing this practice, I can speak from experience as I, myself, am guilty of attempting to portray myself as a male – for example, the autoethnographic interlude in Section 6.2.1 when I played along with an unknown player’s confusion about my gender identity and sexual orientation. Similar to the experiences reported by many of the other female players in this study, I had reservations about unknown players finding out that I was a female and using that as an opportunity to harass me. Thus, I never corrected random players’ assumed maleness outright, and even when I played my male character Szocske, I actively attempted to use neutral language forms to avoid any question about my gender. In the guild, it was never an issue, as the guild has a practice of tagging all characters with a note indicating who the player’s main character was (see Figure 12). This allowed guild members to know when certain players were online, regardless of which character they were playing.



Figure 12: The guild roster pane, and the information for the highlighted character Szocske, indicating that this character is a secondary character (or ‘alt’) of the player Skakavaz.

I was not the only player to engage in this practice, and this practice was not restricted only to females trying to avoid gender-based harassment. Azhure, a male player who played exclusively female characters, talked about this issue in an informal discussion in November 2009. He said that he did not actively work to conceal his gender identity, but that he wished “people wouldn’t make a big deal about gender”. I asked him if he would intentionally deceive other players about his gender, and he responded:

Azhure: Not necessarily. I just don’t think it matters. What do you care if you’re trying to kill a guy for a quest, and the person helping you, what does it matter if that person is male or female? And I found that since I play females, and then some random person asks me if I’m a girl and I tell them I’m a guy, they might give me crap about it. It just doesn’t matter. And if someone’s talking to me, trying to be my friend, just because they think I’m a woman, and then they learn I’m not and stop talking to me, they obviously have other motivations for talking to me besides being friends. I just want to play the game, not have to defend my choices or my identity. It’s not like I actively try to pretend I’m a girl or something, I just try not to make it a big priority in my friendships.

When I asked what he would do when someone directly asked about his gender, Azhure responded that he would “avoid the issue”, or “turn the question around, like, why does that matter to you?” Azhure, therefore, used the modal affordances of the text chat medium – specifically the lack of cues about gender – to deprioritize gender in his friendships. This was not through malicious intent, but rather a desire to avoid the problematization of avatar gender and identity that he reported experiencing. In some ways, Azhure’s reason for not drawing attention

to his gender was similar to those reported by the women in this study – to avoid the issues that unknown others had with gender. In the guild, Azhure never attempted to portray himself as a woman, always being straightforward about his male gender and correcting others' incorrect use of pronouns when they happened.

Textual deception can be done unintentionally as well. Walter, who played a female paladin named Joannis, reported that his writing style, either in text chat conversations or in more formal writing styles, often caused confusion regarding his physical gender. Among the things that Walter cites as possible feminine style indicators in his own speech are: hedges, indirectness, emoticons, and emotion-indicating acronyms like LOL.

Walter: [...] and I just heard this recently from my communications professor [...] he says that my writing style is very feminine in the way it comes off. You know, it's very kind of neutral but it tends feminine. And I've actually heard that from other people on forum RPs and I always thought it was kind of interesting. But I had one person say that you know “if I didn't know better I'd say that you were a woman by the way you write”. And [...] when I type and chat and do the same kind of thing it's all the same, I think maybe that I would come off as a woman by the way I type and then I say “oh you know I'm a guy” and they're like “Oh! I never saw that coming. I thought you were a woman by the way you type”.

LBC: What is it about your typing style that you think or that other people have said that is particularly feminine?

Walter: Um: my communication professor said that in my writing [...] there's a lot of ‘I think’, ‘I feel’, kind of very soft wording in it, you know. Very, ‘this

is the way I feel’, that ‘I felt that I’ve done’ - like that kind of writing. [...] when I write a story or write RP on forums I just can kind of get myself into the mindset of the way of female character would write, would behave or act or write and I think that translates quite a bit in the way I actually write. You know put pen to paper and it comes out that way.

LBC: What about in your chat? Is it, I mean formal writing or story writing is one thing, but what about in your chat, you think it's the same thing?

Walter: I tend to put a lot of LOLs and smiley faces and stuff in my chat so I think maybe that's why it comes across. And I've never been overly crude or your typical male archetypes in chat just because that's just not the way I operate. So I think that's a lot of where that comes from too.

Either intentionally or unintentionally, there are a number of stylistic resources available in text chat that can lead to a person’s gender being interpreted one way or another based on the reader’s indexicalities. Since a textual style including more hedges and emoticons is often associated with females, those men who incorporate these styles into their discourse will often be read as women. When there is some question about the gender of the player or the gender is unclear, players will often seek other cues about gender, often obtaining these cues from other modes. Textual style may be easier to manipulate based on the ability to compose and edit a textual utterance before sending the message, but verbal style – including the pitch of one’s voice – is a clear indicator of gender. Often Ventrilo is the next step for verification of authenticity of gender.

8.2 DECEPTION BY AVOIDANCE

When seeking authenticity of an interlocutor's gender performance, players will often turn to Ventrilo. As I showed in Section 4.2.1, I experienced this very phenomenon with Paetrik and Mork, two male players who lured me into Ventrilo to settle a bet on whether I was actually female or not. Azhure, who above admitted to masking his gender in text, never shied away from revealing his male gender identity and male-sounding voice on Ventrilo. Walter, too, experienced some other players being shocked at the mismatch between his male voice and his written style that indexed female identity in discourse.

These examples show how authenticity can be verified using Ventrilo, and those players who wish to continue to engage in deception will have to deal with the voice-based medium at some point. There are two strategies for continuing deception – some players attempt to disguise voice-based cues in Ventrilo, which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, but the most common strategy for continued deception is to avoid use of Ventrilo altogether. This reflects other research in computer-mediated contexts that suggest that interlocutors are more likely to adopt avoidance strategies in negotiations than they would in face-to-face interactions (e.g. Dorado et al. 2002). In my ethnographic experience, which was corroborated in the interviews, the particular avoidance strategy that many players used was to say that they did not have a working microphone to use Ventrilo. By blaming the technology surrounding the channel of use, these players sought to deflect scrutiny of their gender performance and avoid the use of the voice which would easily reveal gender. These players would freely continue to talk in the text chat mode, but avoid voice chat altogether. This strategy often did not work for these players, as their interlocutors found the lack of interaction on voice chat suspicious. Laira and Rufus both cited the case of a player named Esmerelle, who claimed to be a female but never spoke on

Ventrilo although she was often present on Ventrilo during raids. Esmerelle engaged in flirtatious conversations with male players often, but entirely avoided moving to interactions in non-text modes, claiming a lack of a working microphone. This behavior cast doubt on Esmerelle's gender, and both Laira and Rufus reported amusement at Esmerelle's continued flirting. While Esmerelle sometimes joined the guild on large raid endeavors, she was never really in the 'core' of the guild.

Avoidance of voice chat is often done with unknown players from outside of the core community or guild. Female players would avoid talking on Ventrilo with unknown others because of the fear of harassment in an unsafe space, but some players regularly engaged in deception of those outside of their core circle of friends for fun or for profit and had to avoid using voice chat to continue the deception. The most clear-cut case of this behavior comes in a story that Rawka told me during his interview. The entirety of Rawka's story is included in Appendix B.2 in his own words, but in the next subsection I paraphrase it because my own reaction to his story is quite telling.

8.2.1 Autoethnographic interlude: The Mailbox Dancer

In April of 2012, I am in the middle of an interview with my friend, guildmate, and raid team member Rawka. He has been telling me about his history of playing *World of Warcraft*, how he came to be a member of the guild <SeeD>, and about his own personal gaming philosophy. I have heard many similar stories before, and I am looking forward to what I view as the meat of the interview – the discussion of deception in the game, or the question that I always have to phrase as 'Have you ever known, or heard about, someone who is pretending to be a girl in the game but who is really a guy in real life?'

Asking the question this way bothers me – I am interested in deception in the game, but asking “Have you ever known someone who deceived others in the game?” gets me stories that are interesting – usually about people lying about their playing ability, or scamming others during trade situations – but not what I am looking for. I am seeking identity issues, and the one story that everybody identifies with is gender deception. With Rawka, we had just been talking about exceptional voices on Ventrilo and times when he did not know when someone he was playing with was male or female until he had heard them on Ventrilo, so I try a general question with him.

“So have you ever heard of anybody trying to actively deceive anybody?” I ask.

He seems to verbally mull it over, referencing a guy who used the Ventrilo voice distortion options as a joke, but then says, “I did have a guy in a raid chat who convinced me that he had cancer and that's why I should give him a loot item.” He laughs audibly over Ventrilo.

Even though that is not exactly what I'm looking for, I ask for clarification. Rawka laughs and tells me about an unknown player going through a litany of excuses to try to get Rawka to trade him an item, eventually resorting to guilt with the cancer story. I certainly sympathize with him, as I have heard many of these excuses myself. Rawka continues, “I don't know why someone would use that as a selling point. It's just kind of silly, of all the things you could pick, why would you pick that?”

Trying to draw him out, I share a similar story from my history of playing. “I was in a raid once, a long time ago, on Szocske, who's my male Night Elf warrior. Somebody was trying to get me to do something and tried to use the ‘well, you should do it for me because I'm a girl’.” I laugh at this point, because it was so ridiculous to have that excuse used on me. I finish the story quickly. “And I was like ‘Mmmhmm’.”

Rawka laughs and, commiserating, says, “Oh, that wouldn’t work out either.”

Seeing an opening, I launch into the next question. “Have you ever heard people say that female toons get preferential treatment in this game?” I have heard this a lot, and even experienced a few times myself.

Rawka pauses. He depresses his Ventrilo button, and I can hear him laughing. “You’re gonna love this one,” he says. “Um.” He pauses and clears his throat, leaving the button depressed. “I used to—“ He stops and laughs. I feel awkward as the interviewer, but I also feel my sense of anticipation growing. I stay silent, letting Rawka compose himself and continue. This is going to be good, I think to myself – he is going to reveal that he had a friend who got into raids just because she was female, or something like that. Everyone seems to have a story like that, and I love hearing about them because they reveal gender perceptions in the game’s culture.

To my surprise, Rawka continues, “This is not one of my finer points in life, but when I first started playing this game and it was hard to make money...” He pauses again, and laughs shortly. When he starts speaking again, I can tell that he is choosing his words very carefully and deliberately. “I used to, uh, whisper certain *things* to certain people to make *interesting* amounts of money.”

My jaw metaphorically drops. Amidst his euphemisms, I know exactly the phenomenon he is referring to: the Mailbox Dancer. The Mailbox Dancer is probably not unique to *World of Warcraft*, but it was one of the first uniquely *WoW* phenomena that I encountered in my game playing days. As my first *WoW* character, Parnopaeus the Night Elf hunter, I often saw other female Night Elves in the major cities in *World of Warcraft* standing on top of mailboxes dancing. Some of them would have roleplaying clothing on, but others would be naked, and

some would even be in their armor. Not understanding, I asked an experienced *World of Warcraft* friend the next time I saw her online what this was all about. *They're WoW prostitutes*, she had told me. *They're guys trying to make money by pretending to be women and selling erotic roleplay.*

As I ask Rawka to elaborate, I can hardly contain my surprise. Him? My friend, Rawka, a former Mailbox Dancer? I can hardly believe it, since he does not seem the type. My surprise is evident in my talk as I stumble over words and apologize repeatedly for focusing on this topic, but Rawka takes it in stride and laughs with me. He tells me the whole story – his first character was a female Blood Elf, one of the most conventionally attractive female avatar models in the game, and he would stand on the mailbox in the city of Orgrimmar and remove his character's armor and use the `/dance` command. When he did this, other players – men, he assumed – would initiate conversations with him in private whispers. I can sense Rawka's embarrassment about the topic, so I don't ask him about the precise topics, but he does confirm that they definitely engaged in “sexy talk”.

When I ask him why he did it, his answer is clear and definite. “You'd be amazed at what people pay for in this game,” he says, going on to explain that these players would give him in-game gold and that he made 25,000 gold in two weeks as a Mailbox Dancer. I am shocked, because he is talking about the game in 2007, the same time that I started playing. I remember very clearly working hard selling in-game materials for six months to try to save up the 5,000 in-game gold that I needed to buy the fastest flying mount for my character, and not even being able to accomplish that. 25,000 gold at that time of the game was an outrageous amount of money.

During his explanation, and while I am busy being mindboggled at making that much money so fast, Rawka mentions that he encountered some “creepy people”. I ask him to

elaborate, and he explains, “They wanted my phone number, and they wanted my e-mail address, and a few people asked me to send them pictures.” That immediately strikes me as dangerous, being a female and having been harassed by a few men online in a similar way. I am relieved when Rawka says that he ignored them and blocked them in the game so they could not talk to him.

“Did you ever have anybody just question you as to whether you were actually a girl?” I ask.

“Yes,” he replies, and when I ask him what he did, he admits that he can’t remember specifics. “But, actually, I do remember one person that did find out that I was male, and I actually still talk to him. He’s from Kuwait.”

“He wasn’t mad about it?” This, oddly, does not surprise me.

“No, he was more confused about it,” Rawka says. “He was like ‘oh, I’m not gay,’ and I was like ‘I’m not gay either’. I think it was more of a language barrier than anything. He didn’t understand that I would just do that to get gold and he was unfortunately my victim.”

The negotiation of sexualities here interests me. “After he figured that out, I bet the sexy talk stopped, right?” I ask, and immediately wish I had phrased this question in a more open-ended manner.

“Oh, definitely yes.”

I try the question again. “Did you ever have anybody find out you were a guy and then continue the sexy talk?”

He is definitive. “No.” But, after a moment, he adds, “But I didn’t tell too many people so I didn’t really test that out.”

“Did you avoid answering that question?” I ask, and I realize that we are getting into a topic of multimodality here. I had heard about people avoiding Ventrilo and being questioned about their gender, so I wonder what Rawka did.

“Yeah, I would go around it,” he says. “You know, I would never give anybody my e-mail address, there were no pictures being sent, so there was no way of them finding anything out. I would never tell them my real name, I would always give them a female name.”

“Did any of those people ever ask you to get on Vent and talk to them?” I ask, trying to hit on multimodality explicitly.

“All the time,” Rawka responds.

“And what did you tell them?”

He laughs. “I told them that would be a higher charge.”

“What did they say?”

He’s still laughing, but turns serious quickly. “I would never get into Vent with them, though. I would always make it some obscene amount they didn’t want to pay, and I’d never get into Vent with anybody. To me that’s kind of—“ He pauses, not finding the words, but I understand what he means. It would be something totally different to voice chat with somebody, it would imply a connection, and for Rawka – who definitely has a male-sounding voice – it would reveal his gender and probably get his interlocutors upset with him, since they presumably thought they were talking to a woman. Rawka continues, explaining his concerns about moving to Ventrilo. “I mean, not that what I was doing was okay, don’t get me wrong, because I was kind of messing with people’s minds – but I would not do it, not because of the topic of conversation, but because it could potentially be dangerous.”

We move on to other topics at this point, mostly about the merits of having a large online social life, but Rawka's story sticks with me. His deception was purposeful and for a very specific cause which could be argued was exploitative, and the way he told me made it sound very much like he was not proud of his history; however, he had been hugely successful and made a lot of in-game money, and it also sounded, at least to me, like he had enjoyed the game of deception to some extent. He was careful and strategic with his mode usage, avoiding dangerous situations, revealing the knowledge about these modes that is inherent in their use. This story is perfect for my work, and reveals a subculture that I never thought I would encounter.

What I struggle with, during the interview and afterwards too, is the reaction that his story causes in *me*. I am shocked that my friend used to engage in this behavior, but it does not change my view of him – as an experienced player of the game and someone who is highly invested in the culture, I wonder if my reaction to this story is similar for others. I do not view Rawka's past antics as distasteful, or even as proof that I should not trust him; rather, it just seems humorous to me, like someone telling stories of the days of their youth, and I believe that he would never do something so deceptive these days. What causes this reaction? Looking back at the Community of Practice construct, in which the community of this study defines itself by intimacy and shared norms, I understand where this reaction comes from – Rawka feels close enough to me, and safe enough within the interview setting, that he can tell this story and reveal that he had been deceptive in the past. This is a result of that shared intimacy and the supportive environment of the Community of Practice. Furthermore, Rawka's story shows the social boundaries that are constructed between one's community and outsiders – he talks of his friend from Kuwait who he interacted with more and eventually revealed his gender deception; once

they became friends, the air had to be cleared for the friendship to be authentic. Rawka does not recall any of the other people he interacted with during his time as a Mailbox Dancer, since he formed no meaningful long-lasting relationships with them, and consequently he never revealed his authentic identity to these people. It is a different story in the guild, with his regular raid group, among his friends – long-lasting friendships, including those that stay within the game world and never move to face-to-face interaction, require authenticity to maintain. This is much of what Downing (2009) discusses in his work on virtual victimization – a degree of deviant behavior is accepted and allowed within the game community because it is a game and rules from the physical world do not apply within its boundaries. Thus, Rawka’s deception of these unknown outsiders is licensed within the magic circle of the game; however, since being in a team with someone and gaming with them for a long time allows a meaningful relationship to develop, deceiving those people throughout the relationship is seen as harmful and undermines the meaningfulness of that friendship.

It is difficult to maintain a long-term deception, and within the Community of Practice, it is easiest to just be authentic. Outside of that, it does not matter your identity and whether it is authentic or not – what matters is achieving the objective, whether it is killing the enemy creatures, making gold, or having a sexual experience.

8.3 LARGE-SCALE DECEPTION IN GAME-EXTENAL MODES

In the previous section, I illustrated the social boundaries set up between the large *World of Warcraft* player group and the small Community of Practice that was the group of <SeeD> members that I studied. Rawka’s deception of unknown others, for example, was licensed and

that the rest of us assumed was a guy, and he didn't believe us, but then when we called that person out, they sort of disappeared from the game.

LBC: I remember-

Jahaerys: Like, she sent him pictures and stuff, and I was like, "Uh, that looks more like a model than an actual person?"

LBC: Uh- do you remember the pictures? I think I remember them.

Jahaerys: I sorta have 'em in my head still but it's um, been a while. I don't know if you still have 'em or not.

LBC: I don't, but [...] they were like, really sexy, right?

Like way too =sexy

Jahaerys: =Yeah, it looked like

Yeah, it looked like, kind of, the picture kinda looked like a setup for like, the photo frame, when you buy one and it's already got somebody in-

LBC: What else about that person do you remember, kind of tipped you off that this might not have been a female?

Jahaerys: Just how she always had an excuse for like, "Oh, hey, wanna get on Vent?" or something, and she'd be like, "Oh, I don't have a microphone." And we're like, "You could just download it, and don't have to say anything." And she would never, it always seemed suspicious. There was always an excuse for why she couldn't do something.

LBC: Wasn't {Natholis} texting her too, for a while?

Jahaerys: Yeah, and then like one day, she stopped responding.

LBC: Did he ever try to call her, or did anybody ever try to call her, do you know?

Jahaerys: I don't know. I think he gave the player {Paetrik} her phone number, but I don't think anyone ever called her, at least not that I know of.

Jahaerys cites a number of resources that he used to try to convince Natholis of Filly's deception, including a non-confirmed telephone call to her cell phone number. Looking back through my archives, I found a conversation with Paetrik about this telephone call dated from February 2009.

Paetrik whispers: so I called Filly

You whisper: Oh? What happened?

Paetrik whispers: some guy answered. >>

You whisper: Really??

Paetrik whispers: yah. I asked if this was filly

Paetrik whispers: and he said no, it was her brother.

You whisper: That's really weird.

You whisper: Why would her brother have her cell phone?

Paetrik: because that WAS filly, duhh

You whisper: Seriously. Why would her brother know her WoW character name? Ugh, it really is a guy.

You whisper: Did you tell Natholis?

Paetrik: I dunno if I will. Seems mean to do that to him.

The suspicious cues about Filly were drawn from a variety of multimodal resources: her lack of participation in the voice chat mode, her photographs posted on the guild's forums that seemed too perfect (whether too much like a model, or too sexy), the sudden lack of response to text messages, and the male voice that answered a telephone call.

As part of her ruse, Filly avoided Ventrilo and chatted only by textual modes; however, there are ways to still use voice modes like Ventrilo deceptively. One of these is by using a program called a “voice changer” that can modify the voice of the speaker. Ventrilo has a voice changing setting built in, and some players cited friends and guildmates who would use the voice changer for humor, just to play with the options available and to experiment with voice quality. In these cases, the voice changing option was not used to deceive, because all listeners knew the identity of the speaker. However, one story from Paetrik revealed a more insidious use of a voice changer – an individual used a voice changer from the beginning of the interaction, therefore never allowing others to hear the ‘real’ voice of the player. Paetrik told me the story of his friendship with this individual, Sharky, across several months and many modes. Since I was not able to contact Paetrik for an interview to have him tell this story in a consolidated version, I will summarize the story of Sharky based on the many stories Paetrik told me.

Sharky and Paetrik met in *Final Fantasy XI*, another MMORPG that was quite popular before *World of Warcraft* was released. Sharky claimed to be female, and talked to Paetrik often in the game; soon, Paetrik began to experience romantic feelings for Sharky. Similarly to his and Mork’s experiment with luring me into Ventrilo, Paetrik asked to talk to Sharky on voice chat (he never said whether it was Ventrilo or not, but I will assume that it was). Sharky, just as I had, logged into the Ventrilo server and talked to Paetrik with a distinctly female voice. Paetrik did note that her voice sounded a little robotic, and Sharky’s excuse was that she was using a low-quality microphone that was built into her webcam. Relieved to have Sharky’s gender confirmed, Paetrik felt comfortable expressing his romantic interest, which Sharky returned. Paetrik was never clear with me how close they became, but several months into their friendship, Mork was talking to Sharky on Ventrilo when something happened. Mork told me later that “it sounded like

static, then it was a guy's voice". In Mork's estimation, Sharky had been using a voice changer and it had experienced some sort of error and stopped working in the middle of his sentence, revealing Sharky's actual voice which was definitely male-sounding. Mork told Paetrik about this, and being his long-time friend, Paetrik believed him and confronted Sharky about it. Sharky admitted to using a voice-changer and deceiving Paetrik.

Paetrik said at one point that Sharky played *World of Warcraft* and tried to contact him several times after this revelation in an attempt to continue the friendship, to Paetrik's discomfort. Paetrik had no interest in remaining in contact at all with Sharky after this incident. Each time he talked about Sharky, Paetrik expressed disgust and disdain at this behavior, and mostly embarrassment that he could be fooled so badly. Paetrik had, in fact, been victimized by Sharky's deception. The deception here is much different from the case of Rawka and his Mailbox Dancing days – Paetrik and Sharky had a meaningful relationship and talked to each other using a mode which is supposed to reveal the identity of the player. Furthermore, Paetrik had trusted Sharky enough to at least admit interest in a romantic relationship, and that trust had been violated by the revelation that Sharky's identity had been inauthentic. Rawka's contacts were short-lived and never went to a meaningful level – in the one case that it did, with Rawka's Kuwaiti friend, Rawka freely admitted his deception instead of continuing it and being inadvertently discovered.

While deception of others in the community can be hurtful to those involved, the cases of large-scale deception like the ones discussed in this section are relatively rare. I encountered only one of these actively occurring in my five-year ethnography of *World of Warcraft*, but many people seem to have heard a story about something like this happening. I have reproduced the most extensive of these stories in this chapter, the story of Paetrik and Sharky, because it

represents the most extreme story about deception that I heard in my time studying the community. While stories like these seem to get a lot of air time, they are the exception rather than the rule. As Baym (2011) has asserted, people in online communities tend to look for meaningful connections and authenticity rather than a chance to experiment with identity. However, members of the community are still wary of this type of deception happening to them, and this can cause consequences for interactions on a broad scale.

8.4 UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

In some cases, the wariness about deception, particularly about gender, can have unintended consequences. In general, these consequences include an increased pressure on women to ‘prove’ their identity, in ways that could sometimes be uncomfortable. In <SeeD>, as described previously, there were restrictions in place to prevent women from being uncomfortable about revealing their gender; however, people from other guilds did not always know about these rules that were in place and sometimes behaved amongst <SeeD> members as though they were among the larger *World of Warcraft* population. One case that illustrates this phenomenon is the story of a player named Roxanne.

Roxanne was a member of another guild on the server but sometimes joined <SeeD> on raids when a replacement was needed, since she was friends with Laira from the roleplaying community in which both participated. As reported by Laira and several other players in my data, there was a considerable controversy surrounding Roxanne because of uncertainty about her gender. Rumor had it that Roxanne was a male player masquerading as a female online – the evidence Laira reported for this was similar to that used to implicate Filly as a male player, such

as “She refuses to talk on Ventrilo” to “The pictures she posted online are too sexy to be real”. However, there was also other evidence based on perceptions of the *World of Warcraft* roleplaying culture, such as the assumption that Roxanne roleplayed as a “futanari” character¹⁶ and engaged in erotic roleplay, and the commonly-held belief that only men engaged in this type of erotic roleplay. I never observed firsthand any of these characteristics, however, Roxanne talked to me in-game once about how she felt that some of the players in <SeeD> were harassing her by questioning her gender and her erotic roleplaying. Since I was serving as an officer at the time, she asked me if I would tell the offending guild members to quit their questioning of her. In this conversation, Roxanne consistently referred to herself as a female and was insistent on her gender identity. Much later, during a Google Chat in September of 2012, Laira described the proof she had obtained of Roxanne’s female gender:

Laira: Ska.

I have to tell someone.

LBC: Yesss?

Laira: So, I have {Roxanne} on RealID and we were chatting and boob talk came up as it does with women, and she was like "HERE ARE MY BOOBS"

And sends me a picture.

Holy crap. WTF [what the fuck?]

LBC: Um. WTF.

This is {Roxanne}, who we're fairly certain is a guy?

¹⁶ “Futanari” is a term referring to a character that presents as female but who possesses some combination of male and female genitals. It turns out that this was a false perception of Roxanne, who sometimes joked about roleplaying a futanari character but reported that she never did so.

Laira: Nope, it's a chick.

LBC: Wait, when did you find out {Roxanne} was a chick?

Laira: Uh, when I got her on vent back in Wrath [=*Wrath of the Lich King, the second World of Warcraft expansion*] to fill in raids for us.

She has this little voice like a little girl because she has a condition that affected her lungs.

But, uh, yeah it's a girl.

For Laira, hearing Roxanne's voice on Ventrilo confirmed Roxanne's gender identity. Roxanne chose not to speak on Ventrilo because of her vocal condition; however, since a common tactic for those intending to deceive others about their identity is to avoid use of Ventrilo, Roxanne's avoidance of Ventrilo caused her gender identity to be questioned. When players matched Roxanne's reluctance to use voice chat in combination of her outward expressions of eroticism (such as engaging in erotic roleplay and sharing photographs of her breasts), the conclusion that she was being deceptive about her gender seemed apparent to most players. The case of Roxanne reveals the contradictions in multimodal communication that women in *World of Warcraft* environment must navigate – women are always subjected to questioning about their gender identity, yet revealing oneself as a woman may open a player up to unwanted contact and harassment based on her gender. If a woman talks on Ventrilo and receives unwanted advances or comments about her play style, she may be reluctant to talk on Ventrilo again. To prove her gender identity in cases where she wishes to do so, she may post a photograph of herself as proof of her female gender; however a woman posting a photograph deemed “sexy” may bring her gender identity into question. Women are subjected to unwanted romantic and erotic advances by

men, but when a woman engages in erotic or sexual behavior, she is often either assumed to not be women or shamed for her erotic interests.

8.5 CONCLUSION

In this section, I have detailed a few cases of identity deception, from the mundane (mistaking someone's gender based on cues in their typed text) to the exceptional (using a voice changer over a period of months to actively deceive another into a romantic relationship). In each of these cases, I have shown how mode of communication is a vital component in either perpetuating or untangling the deception. In minor cases of unintentional textual deception, an interaction with the other using voice chat can easily reveal the error; for those who undertake casual deception, it is community membership that matters. For most players, this is the norm of interaction and identity – some deception is licensed within the bounds of the game world because of the different rules that apply within the medium, but once those interactions extend beyond the medium and become important outside of the game, then deception is not licensed. It is acceptable for a player to confuse unknown others in a pickup group about their gender identity, because they will never interact with these other players again. Such confusing interactions can even be thought of as part of the fun of interacting with so many random strangers in this large community – as Rawka did for amusement and profit when he was a Mailbox Dancer. However, once these interactions become more than fleeting and one begins to make friends in the game, then the deception is not licensed any longer; one must 'come clean' with others or risk

alienation and suspicion. I watched this happen first-hand with Filly, and heard about it in many stories, the most extreme of which was Sharky's relationship with Paetrik.

By describing these rare cases of deception, I have illustrated the importance of mode in communication and how players can strategically use multimodal interaction to discern or verify the identities of others. Furthermore, I have shown how the norms of a Community of Practice can help define these practices and differentiate a community from the large group of outsiders. However, even though a community may have its own norms for behavior and acceptance, the prejudices and concerns of the larger group can affect behavior within the community. This was demonstrated by the guild's interactions with an outsider, Roxanne, who seemed to practice all of the suspicious behaviors but, in reality, was a woman caught up in the expectations of women in the gaming community.

This chapter has shown that mode is an essential component in perceiving and verifying identities of other players. However, this verification and authenticity comes into play only at advanced stages of relationship forming – identities do not matter so much in fleeting interactions, nor in occasional interactions with guild members. Once interactions become more frequent and extend to contexts beyond the game, then verifying identity is of prime importance. To show the exact dynamics of the relationship that results in this verification is beyond the scope of this work, and perhaps a route for future investigation, but one thing is clear: increasing the linguistic modes in which communication takes place both reinforces and furthers relationships between players. Mode use is not just a tool to make interactions easier in fast-paced gaming contexts, nor to selectively talk to certain audiences, but it is a resource used in the creation and maintenance of relationships. Those players who avoid certain modes, particularly those with a connection to one's physical self and identity, are seen as suspicious and possibly

not worthy of a closer relationship. These players who engage in deception by avoidance are tolerated but not necessarily accepted; those who go beyond avoidance and actively work to deceive in all linguistic modes are shunned.

9.0 CONCLUSION: MULTIMODALITY AS A SOCIAL RESOURCE

World of Warcraft, designed to be social and necessitating interaction among its players, has a player base that incorporates more modes of communication than the medium itself originally included; with the many modes and channels of communication, each has become specialized and carries with it certain meanings which allow it to function as a semiotic resource. In this dissertation, I have shown how multimodality functions in this virtual world: as a resource for constructing interactions, as a shaper of interactions, and as a key element in the building of relationships. This situation is not unique to *World of Warcraft*, however – all mediums of communication are multimodal, and increasingly so as technology is further embedded in our daily lives. Any analysis of communication must take into account multimodal phenomena; to not do so is to miss a crucial component of the interactional landscape.

To perform a multimodal analysis, I have relied on several sources of data from the ethnography: the recorded interviews from expert players and members of the community, video data of two expert players playing the game in their natural environment, years of recorded chat logs and ethnographic notes, as well as my own intuitions as a member of the community. I could not have understood these constructs unless I had been a fully participating member of the group who had to go through the same learning process and tribulations as any other player of the game. For five years, I played alongside both new and expert players; I learned how to heal dungeons and raids to the best of my ability, which allowed me access to the types of players and

communities that I could report on in this work. Aside from the playing ability, I also learned how to interact through making friends and enemies, leading raids occasionally, serving in a leadership capacity in the guild for a time, and even being harassed. Because I, the researcher, had these experiences that are similar to other members of the community, I was able to gain insight into how the community functions and how members of the community viewed their experiences. This resulted in not just an ethnography, and not just a participant-observation ethnography, but also an autoethnography. One of the contributions of this work to the general body of linguistic ethnography is to add to the growing importance of recognizing the ethnographer's experience as a valuable source of data. Ethnographers have shattered the illusions of objectivity long before I started this project, but in this particular work, the combination of an autoethnographic presentation with participant-observation-style descriptions was a necessary tool to make these observations and do the analysis I have presented. Without self-reflection on the early ethnography and how my experience as a player caused dissatisfaction with prior work, and without carefully observing my own habits and perceptions of norms in the community, I could not have traced the threads of multimodal communication.

Most work on multimodality focuses either on within-interaction mode usage or socio-cultural uses of modes as carriers of meaning. Because of the methods I employed, I have presented both sides of multimodality from the same community and with the same body of data. I first showed how multimodality works within interactions; each of three modes – text chat, voice chat, and face-to-face – are used in coordination to create a complex interaction with many layers of meaning. The modes are used for social reasons involving face work by including or excluding participants; whether that is to save face by not embarrassing another player in a

public and easily-accessible mode or to enact the guild's rules and norms by disciplining a player in a very visible way, mode usage is an integral part of the way the community functions. I focused primarily on expert players because they are the ones who use the modes in these ways, although they often do not realize the extent to which their mode usage is nuanced and complex in everyday interactions. The norms in the community for mode usage are widely held and are often one of the most difficult things to learn for a new player, something I had to learn as a player myself; a player can only be called an expert when he or she commands both the knowledge of how to control their character *and* the communication skill to interact with others using all of the available modes. Players who do not follow the norms of interaction with the modes are often considered to be annoying or inconsiderate, and are not the kinds of players that teams wish to have in their ranks.

On a larger scale, multimodality is not just a resource for individual interactions but also functions as a shaping resource for demonstrations of identity and relationships. One example that I showed of this phenomenon is the use of voice chat by women in the community. Because of the masculinist discourse shown by Nardi (2010) to be so widely perpetuated in *World of Warcraft* and similar gaming communities, women often feel unsafe about revealing their identity publicly without first having a measure of trust in their interlocutors. This results in more than discomfort around unknown others, but sometimes exclusion from activities that involve use of voice chat which can easily reveal one's gender. One of these activities is raiding, which is one of the most popular activities for players of the game and the domain of hardcore players. Women who are interested in advanced gaming events such as raiding often must negotiate their desire to do these activities with the discomfort of using voice chat and revealing their physical gender identity, which can subject them to unwanted advances and, even worse, harassment.

Even though women and other minority groups like gay and lesbian players fear being ‘found out’, the potential still exists for developing meaningful relationships within the game context. The risk of possible harassment plus the stereotype that online communities allow for deception causes players to seek authenticity from their interlocutors in multiple modes. As friendships develop, communication becomes more multimodal as interlocutors communicate first in text chat and then move to voice chat, eventually resulting in the potential to make ‘real life’ connections via social media and even face-to-face meetings. While some deception still exists in the game community, it is tolerated to a small extent since anonymity is a desirable component in this virtual world. Deception about identity with guild members is not tolerated, but is licensed in the context of interaction with unknown others outside of the guild. This double-standard is a complex construct that must be negotiated by players on a regular basis when forming relationships in the game and requires flexibility about aspects of identity portrayal. The main resource for navigating this web of deception and authenticity is voice chat, a mode which can reveal aspects of one’s physical identity to authenticate identity claims.

This work presents a starting point for the comprehensive analysis of multimodal communication as an interactional resource. The variations in mode usage from medium to medium is a topic for further research, including design aspects of games that may affect or impair mode usage. While I did touch on the use of face-to-face talk briefly, there are certainly many opportunities to do a more thorough investigation of the intertwining of mode usage in contexts where many players are playing together in the same physical space (similar to the work on gaming in Internet cafes done by Sjöblom 2008). Similarly, exploring how strategies for multimodal communication learned from a setting such as *World of Warcraft* may be brought over into other contexts in a player’s life has not been investigated.

In this work, I have shown how mode is used both as an interactional strategy for managing who has access to certain chunks of talk by switching channels or modes, as well as a method for establishing trust by exchanging vulnerability for authenticity in the use of voice chat. The norms for using modes are embedded in the social fabric of the community in a similar way to other linguistic constructs like politeness and linguistic variety usage, and interact with interactional strategies in complex ways. Mode use, therefore, is another variable in the constellation of linguistic competence that speakers must learn to be members of a community those who learn and obey the norms for multimodal communication are welcomed, and those who do not are excluded.

APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Transcription conventions used in this work necessitate an amalgamation of many different styles to suit each mode. The following is a guide to the transcription conventions used in this work.

In text chat:

[brackets]	Indicates the chat channel in which the talk occurred.
Name:	Indicates the character to whom talk is attributed.
<i>Italics</i>	Indicates an action performed by the character.
whispers:	A private one-to-one message.
XXX	Identifying information removed

In spoken language (face-to-face or Ventrilo):

[brackets]	Post-hoc information inserted by the author to explain or indicate an action.
`	Falling intonation.
[...]	Ellipsis, material removed to paraphrase.

{Name}	A pseudonym has been inserted.
?	Rising intonation
:	Indicates a long vowel or consonant
!	raised pitch
(.)	short pause
(1)	Pause (duration in seconds)
CAPITALS	emphasis placed on this word

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Included here are transcripts from interview that are cited throughout the dissertation. While partial quotes or small transcripts have been included in the main text of this dissertation, here I have reproduced the longer forms to retain the full context of the quotations.

B.1 WALTER'S INTERVIEW (EXCERPT)

LBC: Um let's see here. Okay now you've been around for a long time and you are also familiar with some of my research, so you know that I'm really interested in like gender issues and you know identity and stuff in virtual worlds. So first thing I wanna ask you um: and I have this question specifically for you, is why did you choose to create Joannis, the female human paladin. Why did you choose to create a female avatar?

Walter: Okay. It's interesting and I don't know if I can quite describe it but um, I was always I always played D&D and one of the first characters I ever created in D&D was a female human paladin named Joannis. Um and part of it was that um: I was very super into like roleplay and you know which is funny because the group I was playing with wasn't. Um but when I

thought of a paladin I always thought that a good character like a good like um: archetype character for that would be like a strong kinda female character for it. Especially very virtuous like Caesar's wife, like, Caesar's wife should be unapproachable. She should be, you know, taintless, she should be beautiful as she is smart as she is you know pure. So I thought that a good archetype would be you know a female human you know, um: so when I played D&D that's the character that I created for this game was a female human paladin. Like okay, and named her Joannis, and I actually roleplayed her as a female and it was interesting and I've always have written female characters before I've written male characters you know because I've done forum RP so, in forum RP sometimes you have to come up with you know three or four different characters, a male character, female character and everything so, um I played Joannis in two D&D games, two separate ones, and when we actually when we got to um: to play Warcraft I'm like okay, we're playing Horde, well now we're switching over to Alliance and I'm going through the character list and I'm like okay paladin! Okay well maybe I'll just resurrect Joannis, and you know that was the only name I could even come up with for a paladin, so that's why I stuck with her.

LBC: Did you ever get any like uh did anybody ever like wonder like oh why you know why is this guy playing a girl character? Like you know kinda look at you with some suspicion or did you ever get any crap about it?

Walter: Um: I would say a little bit [sigh] um you know here are there? But I would um I would never it's actually funny you're the first person I've ever told the whole like how I came up with the character for Joannis, but I would always laugh and shrug it off as heh, if I'm gonna spend sixty levels staring at this avatar I'd better have something nice to look at so.

LBC: But that phrase seems to be just an excuse that people pull out to kind of you know use instead of you know telling people the whole story. Is that the same case for you?

Walter: Yeah I would think so I mean cause you know it's [laugh] It's as awful as it is um: we always joke around that why do your friends pick on you because they love you. My friends can be pretty ruthless when they're picking on each other [laugh] and I've done the same with them but so I've just never really told them why I ever picked a female character so even in D&D.

LBC: That's really interesting. Um did you ever have an experience where like someone you had met in the game who wasn't your friend outside of the game thought you were female and then was surprised that you were really a guy?

Walter: Yup. And actually in <Sassy Vixens> because um the same reason I never hopped on Vent and um and it's interesting my um and I just heard this recently from my communications professor when I was sitting there talking to him and uh after my business and professional communication class, he says that my writing style is kind of very feminine in the way it comes off. You know, it's very kind of neutral but it tends feminine. And I've actually heard that from um: from other people on forum RPs and I always thought it was kind of just interesting. But I had one person say that you know if I didn't know better I'd say that you were a woman by the way you write. And I kind of come up you know sing you know when I type and chat and do the same kind of thing it's all the same I think maybe that it I would come off as a woman by the way I type and then I say oh you know I'm a guy and they're like Oh! I never saw that coming I thought you were a woman by the way you type.

LBC: What is it about your typing style that you think or that other people have said that is particularly feminine?

Walter: Um: the profess-my communication professor said that um in my writing well in the paper that I had turned in that I was asking about and a little furious that I got an A minus on it, I would he said you know that there's a lot of I think I feel kind of very soft wording in it you know. Very, you know, this is the way I feel that you know that I felt that I've done - like that kind of writing. In um: when I write like when I write a story or write RP on forums I um I just can kind of get in the minds you know try and get myself into the mindset of the way of female character would write you know would behave or act or write and I think that translates a lot I actually think that translates quite a bit in the way I actually write. You know put pen to paper and it comes out that way.

LBC: What about in your chat? Is it I mean formal writing or story writing is one thing, but what about in your chat, you think it's the same thing?

Walter: I tend to put a lot of LOLs and smiley faces and stuff in my chat so I think maybe that's why it comes across and I've never been overly crude or you know your typical male archetypes in chat just because that's just not the way I operate. So I think that's a lot of where that comes from too.

LBC: Yeah that's really interesting um, the way that people can kind of tell gender from the way that you know people type. Have you ever had um: or heard of somebody having an experience or had one yourself where somebody was like actively trying to portray themselves as being of the gender that they are not?

Walter: Um: not really not you know anecdotally you always hear stories on you know like in general chat like someone yelling such and such is a man but being in a girl, you know but I've never personally experienced it.

LBC: That's really interesting, um have you know aside from the gender issue have you ever um encountered anybody um: in Warcraft related discourse um: having let's see how do I phrase this. Um: like talking on Ventrilo and being noticeably from like either not a native English speaker or being or sounding very young or very old. Have you ever noticed anybody who sounded like that in any way?

Walter: Um: [sigh] [laugh] Well it if I think I might have told you this before maybe even Mindy mentioned it. There was [laugh] is this uh um there's this uh guy in our old guild named Abel and Abel was very flamboyantly gay in like I love Abel to death he's a great person we would talk guild wars together it was just funny. His character name was Rorygilmore because of the Gilmore Girls but he was the only person I've actually known to go from a male avatar to a female avatar because the female looked pretty? Um that he like if [laugh] if you didn't know Abel and know that it was a male you'd you could definitely could perceive him to be a female.

LBC: Now Mindy had mentioned to me that somebody let's see who did she say - Chops?

Walter: [laugh] Oh yes Chops and Abel. [exuberant laugh] This is a good story.

LBC: Please tell me this story.

Walter: Okay so back on Destromath um: it was probably well we ran them all through Burning Crusade after we cleared the place and cleared it easily. Um if you've ever heard us use the term Hurricane Beer Run, this is what we did in Karazhan. We'd um, one of our druids was you know we all liked to get drunk and basically run Karazhan. I'm not that's the best way to put it. We actually developed a drinking game involved with this, now if you receive a battle rez the person giving you a battle rez and you both take a drink. Um so elaborate rule system for it, it was basically at the end of the night okay how much just drink. Um [laugh] but one night Chops and Abel -- Chops was in the raid and he was particularly wasted this night and um: [laugh] and

[laugh] he started he started hitting on Abel. Um thinking that Abel was a girl? And um: and Abel being the sassy the sassy gay man that he was was having none of this. [laugh] He was like he just refuting Chops at every turn. So Chops whispers um whispers Ben, another character in our guild, like Dude why isn't why isn't Abel hitting back? And I'm trying to be nice and do all this and trying to be all suave and stuff like that? And and and it's just not working. Well Bean you know also says Dude Abel's a guy he's a gay guy. It's like and Chops's like Oh really? I'm I'm still gonna hit on him though. So [laugh]

LBC: [laugh]

Walter: [laughter devolving into giggles] So Abel - he still continued to hit on Abel and got sad when Abel would [laugh] wouldn't engage him back and and he was really bummed about it. [laugh]

LBC: Did that like ah: how did that end up?

Walter: [laugh]Oh but the next day everybody kinda sobered up and it kinda made for a good story. But um Chops is uh: is very um. is very heterosexual um you know male and so I mean it he there was really actually no interest in it whatsoever but it you know no one was mad or there's no fighting or anything like that just everybody kinda actually really laughed about it and thought it was really funny.

LBC: [laugh] That's pretty hilarious. Was Abel like playing with him or or:

Walter: ha!

LBC: or?

Walter: Yeah I really think Abel was kinda playing with him because he - Abel didn't drink or if he did he might have had like an appletini or something like just nothing like major.

LBC: [laugh] Oh man.

Walter: Yeah Abel was definitely just like toying with him it was just amazingly funny.

LBC: That's awesome.

Walter: Yeah Abel was kind of our token gay guy of the guild and everybody loved him and everybody thought he was just absolutely great but it was just kinda [laugh] you know it was the for whatever reason Chops just didn't know!

LBC: You think he just didn't like pick up on the signals or he was just an idiot or [laugh] what did he think his issue was-

Walter: Well little from A little from B I mean to listen to Abel on Vent I mean he I mean and you know I hate to stereotype but he was the stereotypical high pitch kind of excitable gay guy. Like I don't I think he might have been like 18 19 or so like that so he was kind of like [high pitched voice]woohoo! [normal voice] you know like that but I mean so I mean if he didn't know better I mean you could perceive him to be a female on Vent.

LBC: See that's interesting because when Mindy was telling me um: she was trying to remember the story but she couldn't remember all the details but she said that Abel definitely sounded like a guy on Vent.

Walter: Yeah I mean I like knowing like at least for me like I knew he was a guy so like I might have colored it as you know he was a guy but like if you didn't I mean there was a lot for a long time he never really said anything just kinda hung out in the shadows until he realized that we were all cool so I think a lot of people just kind of ass - you know associated him with being a woman so.

LBC: Because he didn't really talk on vent?

Walter: Yeah I mean you know a lot of you know from my experience you know especially kinda shy females just won't talk in Vent. I mean I don't know what it is or if they

just feel insecure talking around a bunch of guys or you know I don't know what that part of it is but I've kinda seen that trend so like if you've got someone who you know and that kind of happened in my case a little bit, like I said I type and chat kinda very feminine just by the way I you know use LOLs and smiley faces and whatnot but um: you know because he I think he did the same thing because he was more afraid of people thinking you know judging him because he was gay that he just never talked to any of us on vent and everybody kinda got that association.

B.2 RAWKA'S INTERVIEW

Rawka: Yeah, I have a friend of mine that has one of those voice changers, but we always knew when he was doin' it, and you know, it wasn't like, he wasn't trying to deceive anybody, you know, he'd just like, put his voice changer on and tell a joke, or something like that, and you know, we'd all get a, you know good laugh out-

LBC: (9) So you've never heard of anybody like trying to actively deceive anybody?

Rawka: No, not, n- I don't think I've ever come across anybody that's actively tried to, um (.) well, you know, well, not with a voi- well, no, this guy didn't do it with a voice changer.

I I did have a guy in a raid chat who convinced me that he had cancer and that's why he should give him a loot item

={umm}

LBC: =[laugh] wo-

Did he just like, whisper you that?

Rawka: Well, you know, he was like, he was t- first he tried to talk me into thinking that the item wasn't good for my class, and you know, he was trying to say that, um, that the stacking buff from rapidly unchaining is not good for hunters, and I was like, nah, I disagree with you. You know, because I do my research, and, you know, he's, he's not gonna be able to, you know, he may be able to pull that on someone that doesn't know, that doesn't do their research, but you know, I I told him straight out that he you know, wherever he got his information from, he was wrong. And then, he moved on to say that, that I should give him that item because he was just diagnosed with cancer, and I told him that, you know, that cancer's a pretty big deal and that it's not something to joke about, and he was saying that he was joking about it, and I said, "Well," I said, "You're pretty blase about it." I said, "Your'e trying to get me to give you something in-game because you have cancer." I said, "That's," I said, "That, to me, doesn't sound like you're taking it very seriously." I said, "So, e-even if you do have cancer," I said, "I'm sorry, I don't believe you, and it's uh, it's not something that you should take so lightly."

LBC: Wow, did you not believe him just because he seemed to be trying to use it as levera-?

Rawka: Why would you use that as leverage though? I mean why, it it just doesn't make any sense to me. I could come up with a better lie in my sleep as to why I deserved that loot item than "Give it to me because I have cancer", that, I don't know, that just, I I don't know why somebody would use that as a SELLing point for me to give them something. [laugh] Just, it's just kind of silly, I don't kn-, or not silly, but just =of all the things you could pick

LBC: =[laugh]

Rawka: =of all the things you could pick, why would you pick that?

LBC: =Ridiculo-

I can say, I've never had somebody do that to me before. Somebody has tried, I was in a raid, um, on, on Zatchke, who's a male knight elf warrior, um, a long time ago, it was like a pug raid, and somebody was trying to convince me to do something and tried to be like, "Well you should do it for me because I'm a girl." And I was like, "Mhmm."

Rawka: Oh, that wouldn't work out either.

LBC: [laugh] I know. Exactly. Um, yeah, this, this whole thing with a d-, like, have you ever heard people say that, that like, people, that women, or female tunes get preferential treatment in this gam-?

Rawka: Oh, they definitely do. You're gonna love this one. Um, [clears throat] I used to, [laugh] and this is not one of my finer points in life, but uh, when I first started this game and it was hard to make money, [laugh] I used to uh, whisper certain things to certain people to make interesting amounts of money.

LBC: Oh...really? [surprise] Cause you said you played female tunes, right?

Rawka: Yes I did.

LBC: Oh, my goodness, that's awesome. What would you, what would you say? If you don't mi-

Rawka: Just, very provocative, very sexually orientated things, and, you know, it's, you'd be amazed at what people pay for in this game.

LBC: Oh my god, the- so like, [stuttering] how would that even work, like, I, I know this is, uh, this might be embarrassing for you, I promise I won't reveal who you are.

Rawka: No, that's okay.

LBC: I kinda wanna know how that worked. Would you just be like, "Hey," you know,

= "Give me 20 gold and I'll -"

Rawka: = Well, usually it was initiated,

It was usually initiated by somebody else, and um, what I used to do, sometimes, is I would just like dance on top of the mailbox, you know, and I was a, I was a blood elf, uh, female, mage, that was my first character, and uh, you know sometimes I'd go into {umm} and dance on top of a mailbox, and, you know, take off all my in-game clothes, and, uh, you know, when you're doin' that, it's amazing what people whisper to you. All of them were initiated by, by somebody else. I didn't initiate any of these conversations, but I would go with them, and uh, until they got, uh, you know, I had a couple of them get just, kinda creepy and very inappropriate, and, so I put them on ignore, but...

LBC: So, like, y- these people would whisper you, and initiate like, sexy talk, I'm assuming, r-?

Rawka: Yup.

LBC: And, you know, then they'd give you gold afterward?

Rawka: Yep.

LBC: That's awesome. Why have I never thought of-?

Rawka: Hey, it's uh, it's, you know, MMO prostitution.

LBC: So like, ho- how much gold would they give yo-?

Rawka: Uh, I'd say I made upwards of: maybe twenty thousand gold, twenty-five thousand gold total? Um, when I stopped doing it, because after that- and at the time of Burning Crusade, if you had twenty thousand gold, I mean if you, I don't know how long you've been playing but I mean, that was a decent amount.

LBC: I remember I had to farm forever and ever and ever to get my five thousand gold to get my epic flying, and that took me like six months of farming, so yeah, twenty thousand was hu-

Rawka: I think I did it in like two weeks, two and a half weeks, from just, you know, prostituting myself on
=the game.

LBC: =[laugh] Oh my God

[laugh] That is awesome.

Rawka: [laughing] I, I don't do it anymore, 'cause, I mean obviously you, you know you got the male characters going and it, you know, you really don't need to anymore, the money is just really devalued in this game now.

LBC: So, you know, you said you got some creepy people doing that. What made them, what, what were they creepy about? Like, what, what would give a, what would set off your creepy alarm?

Rawka: Um, they very, um, explicitive(?) and, you know, they wanted like my phone number, and they wanted my email address, and they wanted my, uh, few people asked me to send them pictures, and um, just, I mean, and I'm guessing a lot of them thought I was actually female, um, because, I mean I don't know any female that would ask a male for pictures.

I mean, I'm sure there's, there, there's gotta be someone out there that has, but, I'm just saying, it's normally the, you know, the opposite way, where the male is asking, you know, so they thought I was female, you know, and they would ask me you know, did I have a website, all this other stuff, and, you know, and that's when I just, you know, put them on ignore.

LBC: So, um

Did you have any like, strategies - I'm sorry I'm focusing on this, but you're the FIRST person I've ever met who's admitted to doing thi-

Rawka: Eh, I think, I thought it was funny, I thought it was fun.

LBC: Um, did you ever have, did you have like any strategies, that like, since I'm a LINGUIST, I'm interested in LANGUAGE. Did you have any like, language strategies, like, or different ways that you would, you would talk or type, um, while doing this, to try to be ambiguous or-?

Rawka: Um, well, you know, I tried to use the emote system as much as possible, so you know, like it was in-game, so like, um, you know, if you use /kiss, or /li- uh [clears throat] sorry, /lick, um, people really liked that one, um, you know, I would try to use the emote system as much as possible, you know, so it was more of like a role-playing scenario where it was actually like, happening

LBC: Did you ever have anybody question you, as to whether you were eh, actually a girl?

Rawka: Yes.

LBC: What, what did you do?

Rawka: um, a couple people I told that I was not female, and uh, a couple, uh, a couple people I did not tell, um, I mean, I can't remember any like, specifics, it was a really long time ago.

Actually, I do remember one person that did find out that I was, that I was male, that I told, and I actually still talk to him to this day. He's from, uh, where's he from, he's in, uh, I don't remember, oh, Kuwait, he's in Kuwait.

LBC: So he wasn't mad about it?

Rawka: No, he, he was kinda more confused about it. He was like, "Oh, I'm not gay," and I was like, "I'm not gay either." And he was like, and and I think it was more of like a language barrier more than anything. He didn't understand that I would just do that to get gold and that he was unfortunately my, my victim.

LBC: [laugh] That's so awesome. Like, it, did, after he figured that out, like, the the discussion, the sexy talk stopped, right?

Rawka: Oh definitely, yes.

LBC: Did you ever have anybody like find out you were a guy and then continue the sexy talk, and give you-?

Rawka: No.

LBC: Okay.

Rawka: {umm} I didn- not too many, I didn't tell too many people, so I mean, I didn't really like, test that out.

LBC: Would you like, avoid answering the question?

Rawka: Um, I would just, yeah, I would, you know, go around it, or, you know, uh, you know, I would never ever, like, I would never give anybody my email address, so they couldn't like, you know, find any like, uh, you know, there were no pictures being sent, so there was no way of them finding anything out. I would never tell them my real name, you know, I would always make up a, a you know, name, if they wanted a, if they asked me what my real name was, you know I would just give, you know a female name, so.

LBC: Did any of those people ever ask you to like, get on Vent and talk to them?

Rawka: All the time.

LBC: And what would you tell them?

Rawka: I told them that that would be a more- a higher charge.

LBC: And what did they say?

Rawka: I would never get into Vent with them though, I mean it would never, it would never go that far, you know, I would always make it like, you know, something obscene that they didn't wanna pay, you know, I'd, I would never get into Vent with anybody. Just 'cause that to me is kind of, uh, I mean not, not that what I was doing was okay, don't get me wrong, I'm not, you know, 'cause I'm kinda like messin' with people's minds, and, you know, now that I look back upon it, I probably, you know, would not make that choice to do that now, um, you know not because of the, the topic of conversation, but I mean it kind of, uh, I don't know, I just, I probably would not do it, um, because it's, it could, it could potentially be dangerous.

LBC: Yeah, the, the reason that I'm asking is just 'cause I know a lot of people do this, even now, even, you know, even when gold is so easy to come by in the game, and I've just never had the, the opportunity to ask, you know, like, what goes on, how it works, how these people feel about it.

Rawka: Um, you know, I gather that they are rather lonely honestly.

AFTERWORD

GIVING BACK: THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S CONTRIBUTION

One of the lessons taught to ethnographers is the need to “give back” to the community being studied. We rely on our informants for data, since they are our best resources for understanding our communities. Without the players I interviewed for this study, or those who taught me or who I played with for years, this dissertation would have never happened. I have completed a major milestone towards a doctorate degree – what do my informants get in return for their data that helped me get here?

A colleague on Twitter asked me “how do you give back to a virtual community?” I have pondered this question long and hard. The members of <SeeD> who gave me their time in interviews and who answered my endless questions have given me so much, and I can never pay them back. Still, I have tried to do my best. Most ethnographers of a linguistic community are in the field and create a dictionary or writing system for their informants, but my community already has all of those things. I suppose I could say that I gave them my Tuesday and Friday nights for three years as the main healer for the guild’s raids, but that is not enough – I did that for my own enjoyment as well. What I did give back was agreeing to be the steward of the guild

when others would not (or could not), and maintaining a constant vigilance of the space that had been created for the guild. The original creator of the guild, Averik, had been passionate about one thing: this guild would be a safe place for everybody, and nobody would denigrate another player for being a woman, for being gay, for being young, for being Chinese, or any other identity trait. She envisioned <SeeD> to be a place where people from all walks of life could come to play *World of Warcraft* together. When I held the mantle of guild leader, I made sure that vision continued.

I admit I mis-stepped a few times. I used a heavy hand the first few times I had to tell someone to stop using the word *gay* to mean ‘stupid’; I, too, learned how to be more compassionate and gentle, because as the old saying goes, “you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar”. Overall, however, I think this guild’s purpose and the lessons taught about safe spaces and acceptance of others has had a positive impact. The young people who grew up in the guild are in college now, and more than once I have watched them gently reprimand their friends on Facebook for intolerant language. Several of those people who led raids or served as officers have developed a toolset for managing people in other parts of their lives – I like to believe, perhaps naïvely and perhaps not, that it was the safe space of the guild that allowed them to learn those skills. I have several times been called the guild’s “mother hen”, a term that I adopt with great affection – I watch out for them, and have found myself caring about everyone’s well-being. Not everything worked out well all the time, but perhaps it is better for people to find their flaws and faults in a safe place where their friends – yes, friends, not just ‘guildmates’ or ‘raid team members’ – will forgive them.

It is not entirely my doing, of course. There have been some fantastic people who have helped this happen along the way, and people who have done far greater things than I have with

this safe space. The best example of this is Laira, who is the primary organizer of the “Running of the Gnomes” breast cancer benefit hosted by <SeeD> in *World of Warcraft*.¹⁷ Beginning in 2010, Laira organized a large scale in-game event where *WoW* players from all over the world create gnome characters with pink hair and pink outfits to race across Azeroth to promote breast cancer awareness. Hundreds of players participate in this race every year, and part of the event is a donation page for breast cancer charities linked to the race. The guild has raised over a thousand dollars in donations from this event page alone, and the impact of the event is indeterminable. While I assisted Laira with this event in small ways as I could, I like to believe that the mantra of the guild and the women and men who played with us have all helped Laira create this fantastic event.

I cannot name all of the people who have helped me understand this culture and this world – they are far too numerous to fit in a document, but suffice to say *everybody* who has met me in *World of Warcraft* has had an impact on me and my research. Particularly, I am thankful for all those who were part of <SeeD>, whether for five minutes or five years; I cannot produce a thing that I have made for this group of people (except this dissertation), but I hope that I have helped make a special place for them in the vast virtual world. I am indebted to them, and thankful for their time and energy and patience with me these past five years.

¹⁷ <http://runningofthegnomes.blogspot.com>

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