**Sex and gender in World of Warcraft:**

**Identities, love, and power**

by

**Cherie J. Todd**

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how gamers construct sex and gender in the online game World of Warcraft (WoW), with a particular focus on connections between intimate relationships and gendered power relations. Every year more people choose to play online games but despite this 'gaming culture' continues to be dominated by masculinist discourse that works to marginalise those who do not conform to patriarchal and heteronormative ways of being. This in turn impacts upon the ways in which gamers 'perform' or 'do' their identities including interacting and communicating with others. This research utilises feminist poststructuralist theories to examine: how gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW; the intimate and loving relationships gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond; and, the ways in which gendered power relations are constructed in WoW's online gaming culture and how this affects gamers relationships both online and offline. Butler's theory regarding performativity is also utilised to aid in the analysis of gendered and sexual identities within WoW.

The theoretical lens informs the choice of methods. Interviews, online questionnaires, follow-up email questionnaires, discussions within online game forum websites, and autoethnography were used to examine 57 participants' (35 men and 22 women) experiences of WoW's 'gaming culture' and their relationships with other players. The findings are organised across three substantive chapters. The first focuses on the body and how gender and sexuality are represented via avatars in WoW. It also highlights how people who do not conform to heteronormative ideals and values are marginalised. The second substantive chapter discusses participants' experiences of intimate and loving relationships in WoW, including how obstacles such as geographical distance are negotiated in relationships between gamers. In addition, I highlight how gaming can be understood as a sensory experience, where emotion and affect are important elements in contemporary game design, and how these elements are

evident in WoW and the relationships that evolve within that space. The third and final substantive chapter examines the culture of online games, including the ways in which sexism and misogyny are evident within WoW and the wider gaming community. In particular, I look at how women are positioned in games, as players, game designers, and game critics.

Considering the growing practice of gaming as an 'everyday' social activity – as well as the depth and intensity of friendships and intimate relationships between gamers – encourages a more critical understanding of the normative and powerful ways in which bodies and online spaces are mutually constituted. WoW as a digital world has distinctive spatial aspects. This study adopts a feminist geographical approach in order to contribute to critical discussions on the relationship between gender and sexual subjectivities, intimate relationships in WoW, and the culture of gaming.

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has been so comforting. To Mariella, you're such a wonderful friend and the world would be a much better place if every best friend was as brilliant as you. To my daughter Indy, thank you for being an incredible daughter, a remarkably talented person and for making being your mum so easy – You brighten my every day ☺

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# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This research examines how people perform their gendered and sexual identities in the online game space of WoW. More specifically it focuses on the formation and maintenance of social and intimate relationships between gamers.[1] Online environments are now recognised as spaces that are experienced *through* the body, and as such, are subject to a myriad of real-world entanglements, for example, between physical place, representation, identity, sexuality, emotion and affect (see Crang *et al.* 1999; Valentine 2006; and Shaw and Warf 2009). While recent contributions (especially from media studies) do much to further understandings of online spaces, there continues to be comparatively less research being conducted within the discipline of geography. Therefore, how the internet and 'real' space connect and intersect with people's emotional and intimate lives continues to be a topic that is understudied. As highlighted by researchers such as McGonigal (2011) and Yee (2014), there are many positive elements of online games that are coming to light, and the social and cultural contexts of online games are now better understood as diverse networks, where emotions and concerns are *felt* by those participating in these online environments.[2] Other issues, however, are also present in online games including sexism, misogyny and cybercheating, which I discuss in-depth later in this thesis.[3]

The aim of this project is to examine how players or 'gamers' in the online game WoW 'do' sex and gender. In particular I focus on sexed and gendered identities; intimate and loving relationships that develop amongst gamers; and gendered

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[1] In this thesis the term 'gamer' includes anyone who plays multi-media video games, regardless of how many hours they play per week. The term 'gamer' first emerged in the early 20th century in association with military-based board games (Peterson 2014). Even from its first use, Peterson (2014) argues, the term 'gamer' is most commonly connected to men and has always carried heavily male connotations. See the Glossary for a full list of definitions for specialist terms.

[2] The word 'felt' is italicised in order to emphasise the subjective and embodied experiences of both the researcher and research participants.

[3] Here 'sexism' relates to the attitudes or behaviour based on tradition and stereotypes of sexual roles, and 'misogyny' is perceived as the hating, disliking, mistrusting or mistreating of women. Also, 'stereotypes' are understood as simplified/standardised conceptions or images invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group or culture (OxfordDictionaries.com 2015).

power relations. The three research questions I address are: "How do gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW? (Chapter 4); what kinds of intimate and loving relationships do gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond? (Chapter 5); and, what kinds of gendered power relations are constructed in WoW's online gaming culture and how do these affect gamers' relationships both online and offline? (Chapter 6).

There are many different avenues available for people wanting to establish online connections with other individuals and/or communities, such as Facebook and various dating sites, as well as other online social forums or blog pages. For several reasons, however, I have chosen to focus on gamers who play in the massive multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG)[4] World of Warcraft. First, research has shown that many players are drawn to these games and continue to play them because of the high level of social activity that occurs (Nardi and Harris 2010). Often emotion and affect are evident within particular gaming scenarios in WoW (Shaw and Warf 2009), and like many other online games, the storylines played out in WoW are based around fighting and killing, and woven primarily through highly masculinist discourses. It is, after all, called World of *War*craft. Yet, perhaps somewhat ironically the game's design promotes or reinforces player perceptions of friendship, community, family, and cooperative play, as there are numerous scenarios that require players to group together in order to complete their quest objectives.

Second, these games offer an array of options for subscribers by making available a diverse range of online environments that make it possible for gamers to meet and engage in activities together (Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Third, WoW continues to be one of the most popular MMORPGs since its release in 2004, with subscribers numbering in the millions. This outcome and longevity of success is something

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[4] MMORPGs are online 3D environments where virtual worlds are imagined and created by each person. Players discover other players, where it is possible to create and customize their own digital 3D persona (also known as an avatar), and are able to communicate with other people.

that the majority of online games do not experience. Fourth, video games are not just a 'fad', rather they are here to stay, with more people playing online games every year. Finally, online games (such as WoW) offer people a myriad of options for the (re)presentation of 'self'. The creation of an avatar or a digital 'second self', typically gives people the chance to re-create themselves in whatever way they choose by utilising a wide range of avatar templates. Yet the hetero-dominant values and norms of WoW's gaming culture are not always observed by players and in this thesis I highlight several instances where they are resisted and challenged (Del Casino 2009).

This study advances geographical knowledge in various ways and contributes to a growing international literature on embodied and queer[5] geographies of online space, gender, sexual identities, and emotions (Oswin 2008). An examination of this research topic from a geographical perspective articulates a deeper understanding of identity by exploring the complex uses, experiences and formation of relationships in online spaces. The notion that online space is performative is a key concept in this study, and I utilise a particular view of 'cyber/space' (originally conceived of by Madge and O'Connor 2005, 83) that emphasises a blurring of boundaries between real and virtual space.[6] In this instance, the backslash in 'cyber/space' is emblematic of the mutually constituted and dyadic nature of both spaces. This notion of 'inbetweeness' signifies a way in which to understand the theorising of online spaces in relation to gendered and sexual identities. Madge and O'Connor are among the first geographers to explore this notion. As such, it denotes the beginning of a new way in which to understand the theorising of cyberspace in relation to gendered and sexual identities. Kinsley (2013a) argues that many of the terms used to discuss digital spaces can become

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[5] In the context of this study 'queer' refers to anyone who does not fit with heteronormative notions of gender and sex. 'Queer' is also often used uncritically as an umbrella term encompassing lesbian, gay men, bisexuals, transgender, people questioning their identities, as well as those who do not use identity labels.

[6] Online, offline and digital are the main terms used in this thesis for discussions around digital geographies. All of the following terms, however are also used at various points: 'digital space'; 'cyberspace'; 'virtual'; 'real-space', and 'online' space.

problematic as they tend to evoke a sense of separation, or disembodied dimension of spatial experience. Therefore, it is my intention in this thesis to avoid simple binary concepts and address the relationship between human and technology as constitutive. Furthermore, I discuss various theoretical perspectives relevant to this study which bring attention to areas of discussion that highlight geographies of cyberspace, techno feminism and 'bodies' of performance, identity and queer geographies, and geographies of emotion. In this thesis I draw on research data that aids in examining further the ways in which gaming can be understood as an embodied activity – where the players occupy spaces within both online and offline worlds, and where the two-way, mutually constituted relationship between these two worlds is made more visible.

Past studies often attempted to distinguish or separate offline life from online experiences. These binary distinctions, however, are now viewed by gamers as limiting, as many adopt key components of their online worlds into their lives and identities. Consequently, these past views are seen to be simplistic as they do not reflect gaming experiences accurately (Bell 2002). Research has shown that online relationships have the capacity to affect real-space intimate relationships (such as friendships and marriages) in both positive and negative ways (Underwood and Findlay 2004). The internet is increasingly being understood as a space that is not separate or disconnected from the real-world and researchers are now taking note of how people develop and maintain relational and emotional links via technological interfaces (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). Geographers Dodge and Kitchin (2001, 52), for example, noted more than a decade ago that:

> Cyberspace has a number of implications in relation to both identity and community – it allows us to explore who we are, as well as changing who we are; it provides new spaces in which communities can develop.

Heteronormative and homophobic discourses are the norm within most mainstream online games. The social and cultural contexts of online games are now better understood as consisting of dynamic social networks that expand and grow, and where emotions and concerns are felt by those in these environments. Issues that arise offline, such as sexism, misogyny and homophobia are also present in online games and I draw on Butler's (1988; 1990; 1991; 1993; 1999; 2004) work in order to examine the ways in which gender and sexuality can be better understood as performative and troubling.

In this thesis, I provide discussion relating to homophobic discourse and non-heterosexual identities within WoW, and examine the ways in which they reflect and reinforce sexual subjectivities and politics in offline spaces. While there is discrimination in online games, there is also resistance. Consequently, digital spaces are also important places for online communities and I discuss how marginalised identities resist hegemonic norms by forming friendships and larger community groups in order to make spaces of their own. Guilds[7] are a good example of this as they enable players to recruit other gamers with similar interests into their guilds, such as players interested in PvP (player versus player) guilds, high level raiding guilds, casual/social guilds, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) friendly guilds.[8]

Since the early 1990s gender studies have increasingly focused on how people 'do' gender, rather than looking upon gender as culturally constructed sex. This thesis utilises Butler's work to expand understandings of how gender and sexuality are experienced in WoW through performance. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler describes gender as performative, where actions or

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[7] A guild acts as a home base for players. They typically support new members and guild members assist each other with advancing further in the game, including gaining items such as high level armour and weapons. Guild members also have their own instant message communication channel, which means that if they choose to, they can discuss guild matters with a degree of privacy.

[8] According to WarcraftRealms.com (2014) there are currently just under one million guilds belonging to Alliance, and over 800,000 belonging to the Horde, making an overall total of approximately 1,800,000 guilds.

performances are what constitute gender, and argues that we cannot separate gender from sexuality without limiting understanding of the former. Consequently, the sex/gender division is viewed as unfounded. By taking sexuality and social context into account when studying gender, this thesis demonstrates that we can further understandings of doing gender in an online environment such as WoW. As noted by Vares *et al.* (2011), individuals respond in various ways to popular representations of femininity, which can counter many of the claims made about the 'sexualisation' of women. In a similar manner, I reflect upon elements of gender and sexism in WoW, in relation to the media images and the hyper-sexualisation of avatars, including how women who game critically assess these images and their own participation within a male dominant socio-cultural online environment. The term 'avatar' can refer to the persona of a gamer/internet user. They are often described as the computer user's digital representation of their self and/or alter ego. Avatars are depicted as three-dimensional models and are commonly used in role-playing games. They are often used in internet forums and other virtual communities as two-dimensional icons (pictures).

The internet has made it possible for people to keep their offline identities hidden, as well as have "unparalleled control over the construction and presentation of their identities" (Roberts and Parks 1999, 521). It is common-place for internet users to remain anonymous in their communications with other online users and consequently, the internet is often viewed as a place where people can both express and experiment with their identities in a more 'open' and liberal manner, without the socio-cultural restraints of 'everyday' life. This can be seen, for instance, with the phenomenon of gender-switching, which involves the performance of various sexualities, where for example, a man chooses to re-present himself online as a virtual woman, or vice-versa, where a woman takes on the appearance of a virtual man (see, MacCallum-Stewart 2008; Roberts and Parks 1999). Butler (1993) explains that gender is performative and argues a separation of gender from sexuality limits the understanding of both. In this sense, the thesis de-stabilises

and de-essentialises normative notions of gender and sexuality, and provides a critical analysis that recognises constructions of identity as fluid and constantly shifting.

This research also seeks to further understandings of bodies and the ways in which knowledge is (or is not) produced. For instance, geographers such as Johnston and Longhurst (2010) argue that the role of the body is crucial to the production of knowledge, including when engaged with technology. Feminist theorist Haraway (2004) states that a machine is not an 'it', rather a machine is yet another aspect of embodiment. Early debates concerning internet usage assumed that "because it is a disembodied form of communication, it would be impersonal and facilitate deceit", consequently "reducing trust and accountability in online social relations" (Valentine 2006, 367). Yet, studies also show that many people find that their online experiences of love and romance feel just as 'real', and in some cases, more fulfilling than offline romantic relationships (Underwood and Findlay 2004). Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 185) argues that people involved in online relationships "are often highly emotional and sexual". As such, the level of emotional involvement in an online relationship is often reported to be more intense than in an offline one. This research did not intend to examine participants' online relationships with regard to the topic of 'cybercheating', however, this was a factor for six participants who stated that they had cheated on their partners. Intimate online relationships are a growing social and cultural phenomenon and a study of the online game Second Life (SL) by Kolotkin *et al.* (2012, 1) shows that people engaging in online relationships while already committed to an offline partner, are "extremely prevalent (81.7%)". They also contend that no offline relationship was "found to be significantly more satisfying than any SL relationship".

The field of feminist geography has been enriched by examinations of people's life worlds and the role of emotions in research. The gendered basis of knowledge production is a key reason why emotions have previously been marginalised or neglected altogether in geography (Anderson and Smith 2001). Emotions,

however, are determined by a variety of differentials, including sexuality and gender (Davidson *et al.* 2005), and emotional geographies have often been marginalised, as greater value was placed on masculinist approaches to research that adopted core elements such as detachment, objectivity and rationality. Furthermore, elements such as engagement, subjectivity and irrationality have been disregarded, devalued, and frequently feminised (Anderson and Smith 2001). As Davidson *et al.* argue, "clearly, our emotions *matter*" (2005, 1: emphasis in original). The experiences of physical and emotional attraction, and of falling in love, are typically associated with extreme and intense emotions. Therefore, this research has important implications for the field of emotional geographies, as it examines various elements of online games, which includes: sexed and gendered performances of identity; levels of 'connectedness' between gamers and their avatars; online gaming cultures and communities; the role of dominant discourses within these online spaces; and people who experience intimate relationships and fall in-love in online games.

The idea of using avatars has become increasingly evident not just in gaming but also in popular culture, with movies such as *The Matrix* (1999), and more recently *Avatar* (2009), where the main actor's consciousness switches between their offline bodies and their avatar bodies (Todd 2012). In both of these examples, while in the body of their avatars, the main characters experience challenges and gain knowledge. As such, their experiences are portrayed as liberating and beneficial to the development of the characters. Blizzard Entertainment's (2014a), *World of Warcraft: Looking for Group* documentary highlights the complex and diverse social networks operating in WOW, while also showing gamers who are involved in intimate relationships with people they met while gaming. What these particular retellings of online game environments neglect to address, however, are the ways in which hegemonic values and norms are present in online spaces and the negative ways in which they affect these spaces. The people who participate in these online environments often state that they are drawn to them because there are aspects of online games that offer an exciting alternative to their 'everyday'

lives, such as increased socialisation and experimental play with online identities. In contrast to offline spaces, many online games are designed specifically for the purpose of providing people with alternative avenues for expressing themselves as individuals and collectives, without being subjected to negative judgements that they would otherwise be subjected to in offline environments. Digital spaces, however, are not free of negative elements, as social norms and values are transported into online spaces and affect the ways in which people present their identities and socialise with others.

The options available for avatar creation continue to expand and grow (Boellstorff 2008; Meadows 2007), and the subject of gender and games continues to be an important part of these discussions. At present, women make up approximately 50% of all gamers, however, it is important to note that this figure differs significantly when looking at the gender within WoW where women make up approximately 15-20% of the player base. Women are also under-represented within the games industry, and continue to be depicted virtually within games in roles that are sexualised, submissive and/or derogatory (Yee 2014). There continues to be a steady increase in the number of women playing games every year, and also in the number of women involved in the games industry (Schott and Thomas 2008).

Since the advent of the internet in the 1980s there has been a rapid and dramatic change in the way that people approach and construct relationships with one another (Bell and Kennedy 2007). Internet users meet across a range of social and geographical scales, from the individual, to the community, to countries, to the globe. Video games are an increasingly popular form of entertainment medium, and one that also facilitates these types of communicative relationships within diverse and complex online environments. As a result, people who would not usually get the chance to meet offline, meet online, and this occurs within many different online environments, including games like WoW. MMORPGs are immensely popular, with the number of subscribed members for some games

reaching into the millions. In January 2014, WoW reported having more than 10 million subscribers. In 2015, gaming is a multi-billion dollar industry and reported to be more profitable than the movie industry. Video games continue to exist in a transformative state and evidence suggests that video games will continue to be a dominant form of entertainment medium in the future (Crawford *et al.* 2011). For example, gaming has long been associated with 'geek culture', which as noted by Clemens (2013) is on the rise, with 'nerdy' now being perceived as the new 'cool'. Clemens (2013) points out that the success of the American television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* has not only had a positive effect on science and religion in the west but also on the number of college students enrolling for study in physics. It is important to briefly mention 'geek culture' as it is part-and-parcel of the rising interest in gaming, and for many people it has become an 'everyday' activity. People's social networks are now often global. As noted by Ellcessor (2012, 57):

> "Geekiness" can apply to any number of pursuits. But geeks have been most strongly associated with technology, from radio hardware to computer engineering, and the geek identity has largely been linked to an alternative form of white, heterosexual masculinity. Even women who do enjoy geeky activities may shy away from identifying themselves as geeks, because of perceived social stigma and the rarity of women in some geek circles. This can result in perceptions of the female geek as "mythical" by men who self-identify as geeks, especially as they may attempt to masculinize their own gender identities by displaying sexual interest in conventionally beautiful women. In this conflicted context, women who participate in geek cultures often gain acceptance through either the erasure or the exaggeration of their beauty and traditional femininity.

In many societies playing multi-media video games is considered 'normal' for the majority of children. Leisure activities at home, or school based activities that

adopt games as tools for learning are commonly utilised. Many adults also spend time in games, both at home and at work. Yee (2014, 5) states: "video gamers no longer form a fringe subculture; these games are rapidly converging with many aspects of our everyday lives". As such, games play an important role in many people's lives – "they are where we play, where we work, and where we fall in love".

During the course of this research I was contacted by a school counsellor, who was interested in talking to me about my research because she was beginning to notice a growing number of students who were spending much of their spare time in online gaming environments. One student told her that it was easier to live life as a character in the games than in her everyday world. In short, this school counsellor wanted to better understand why some people are so attracted to online games, sometimes to the point of not wanting to engage in offline activities. Game developer and Director of Research at the Institute of the Future, Jane McGonigal, at a speaking engagement commented:

> Reality is depressing. It's unproductive and hopeless. It's disconnected and trivial. It's hard to get into. It's pointless and unrewarding, lonely and isolating. It's hard to swallow. It's unsustainable. It's unambitious, disorganised and divided. It's stuck in the present (McGonigal 2012, Computer History Museum (CHM) Revolutionaries guest speaker).

McGonigal went on to explain that reality is not always all of these things but that the purpose of her work is to expose the ways in which games enable people to become the 'best' version of themselves. Sometimes people think of gaming as a wasteful use of time, which is why McGonigal argues that computer and video games are fulfilling genuine human needs that sometimes go unmet in the offline world. McGonigal says: "games are providing rewards that reality is not. They are teaching and inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not. They are

bringing us together in ways that reality is not" (McGonigal 2011, 4). As highlighted by McGonigal, there are compelling reasons why so many people (such as school students) are attracted to online games, although they appeal to people for different reasons, such as their ability to facilitate diverse social networks, provide immersive forms of game-play, and offer players achievement based rewards when they perform well within the game. Yee (2014) outlines these elements, stating they are not separate from each other, rather, they overlap and the relevance or importance of each shifts accordingly for each individual.

The research conducted for this thesis furthers understandings of relationships between identity and intimacy, drawing on the data from participants who have met their partners while gaming in WoW. In this research I consider the mutually constituted relationship between people and place, as well as the ways in which sexed and gendered identities are performed in relation to love, romance and hegemony in WoW. Drawing on the experiences of adult gamers (18 years and older) from various countries, I reflect on how gamers are choosing to: represent their online sexed and gendered identities; socialise in WoW; and, experience close friendships and/or intimate and romantic relationships with other gamers. Gamers who discuss their intimate online relationships often report that they feel as personal and as 'real' as their offline relationships (Cornwell and Lundgren 2001; Landstrom 2007). Online social activities can include meeting up with old friends, finding new ones, falling in love and getting married. Also, at celebratory events, such as wedding ceremonies (which occur in online games like Second Life and WoW), friends and family are often invited to attend as virtual guests. At a wedding, most of the participation and socialisation occurs within the cultural structures of that particular online environment (whether it be a chapel, meadow, or beside the beach). Those in attendance will most likely reside in several different countries, and everyone (including the bride and groom) will be watching, listening and participating in a ceremony that is taking place on a computer screen in front of them. This, however, does not necessarily make the ceremony any less 'real' or emotional. Also, some of those attending the wedding online may also

choose to gather together at an offline location (i.e. someone's home) to celebrate the wedding. Searching on YouTube.com for WoW or Second Life weddings uncovers a vast number of video-recorded events. Some of these have been recorded from a comical point of view, but others portray profound and heartfelt ceremonies of people who want to share and celebrate their special occasion with friends and family. Throughout this thesis I highlight research data that has been provided by people who game in WoW. As such, what follows is a brief overview and description of WoW.

**World of Warcraft (WoW)**

WoW can be described as a fantasy based MMORPG. It is premised upon the concept of two warring factions, the Horde and the Alliance. As the title of the game suggests, WoW is primarily conceived of as a game of war. As such, it conveys a masculinist discourse, which can be linked to both discourses of war (Hutchings 2008), as well as the minority status of women who game (Brehm 2013). Blizzard Entertainment[9] originally released it as an online game in 2004, and it was the first immersive role-playing game to become successful on a global scale, with subscribers numbering over four million within two years of release. By 2008 the subscriber base had climbed to 10 million worldwide (Ducheneaut *et al.* 2006). Since 2008 subscriber numbers have fluctuated, increasing to 12 million but then dropping back to approximately 7 million in 2014. Subscription numbers, however, are likely to fluctuate yet again with the next game expansion[10] (Warlords of Draenor, released in December 2014*)*. With each new expansion Azeroth (the name of the 'world' in WoW) has continued to grow. Overall, there have been several new expansions that have added to the overall digital landmass and playable area of the game. Del Casino and Hanna's (2000, 2006) critique of

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[9] Blizzard Entertainment is the creator of several popular online games, including: Hearthstone, StarCraft II, and Diablo III.

[10] Since first being released in 2004, Blizzard has released several expansions which have added more playable content to the game of WoW. These expansions include: The Burning Crusade in 2007; Wrath of the Lich King in 2008; Cataclysm in 2010; Mists of Pandaria in 2012, and Warlords of Draenor 2014.

tourism maps reveals the ways in which cartographic illustrations are not just read as texts but as spaces:

> A map space is not bound by the margins of the paper on which it is printed, but is inscribed with meaning through its intertextual linkages with other texts and spaces. In addition, map spaces are sites through which we can examine the processes of identity construction, and the historically and spatially contingent social relationships that constitute identity categories (Del Casino and Hanna 2000, 30).



**Figure 1.1: Screenshot of the three main land masses in World of Warcraft ©
Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

WoW maps operate in a manner similar to tourism maps, as players (like tourists) rely on them to navigate the digital landscapes. Also, there is an imperial element to these maps as they are constructed to prioritise particular themes, such as territorial control (which race has control over which area), and access points (where travel flight points can be accessed by each faction), making it possible for gamers to traverse large areas of the map. There are currently three world maps that make up World of Warcraft and include Outland, Draenor, and Azeroth (see

Figure 1.1). There are a further four separate continents in Azeroth, known as Kalimdor, Eastern Kingdoms, Northrend, and Pandaria (see Figure 1.2).



**Figure 1.2: Screenshot of the continents located in Azeroth © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

From the two opposing factions in WoW, players must choose to belong to either the Alliance or the Horde. Players can also choose to play as either male or female (not openly inbetween genders) and each faction has six races[11] of beings (see Chapter 4). There are, however, no options for embodying gender that falls outside of stereotypical norms. Several classes (such as hunter, warrior and mage) are available to each race and this allows for further specialisation of avatars, as each class has its own added advantages and/or disadvantages. Players work their way from level 1 to 90 and as their level climbs, so too does their strength and specialised abilities (see Figure 1.3). WoW is an achievement based game and as such players must complete a number of objectives (such as quests, dungeons,

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[11] In much academic writing, for example, the term 'race' (as opposed to ethnicity) is considered problematic. Therefore, it is important to note that game designers typically use this term to portray the diverse range of physical appearances that make up each avatar within WoW, of which the majority of avatars are drawn from mythical and fictional constructs, such as elf and orc. Horde races include: Blood elf, orc, tauren, undead, trolls, and goblins. Alliance races include: Night elf, dwarves, draenai, humans, gnomes, and worgen. At level 10 Pandaren's must choose which faction they want to belong to. How race is portrayed and also the culture of racism in games is examined further by Nakamura (2000; 2009) and Kolko *et al.* (2000).

raids, and scenarios,[12] also known as 'instances'[13]) in order to gain experience points (also called "XP") and attain higher levels where new game content becomes accessible. With this particular (achievement-based) style of game, players are continually tested in relation to their avatar's strength and capability. Completing quests, dungeons or raids, for example, offers players XP and additional rewards (called "loot"), which can include higher level weapons and armour (and also gold, which is the in-game currency).



**Figure 1.3: Screenshot of a tauren male, warrior class in WoW's character creation and customisation menu. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

There are approximately 200 realms listed in the US server, 12 in Oceanic, five in Brazil, and three in Latin America.[14] Extra servers are now available in Australia. The geographical distance from servers also affects the speed of players connectivity to WoW, therefore, players located in New Zealand, for example, are best suited to connect to the server in Australia. There are four different play-styles that players can choose from including: player vs. player (PVP); player vs

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[12] Dungeons and raids are separate 'instances' or events where groups of players work together to overcome the fighting forces contained within the instances. Up to five people can enter a dungeon as a grouped party, and up to 25 people can enter a raid. This number, however, typically changes with each new expansion.

[13] Instances are where a group of characters enter an event together. The term 'instance' comes from each group or party having a separate copy, or instance, of the dungeon, complete with their own enemies to defeat and loot treasure or rewards from.

[14] In order to accommodate the high volume of people playing WoW, Blizzard has made numerous servers available at different geographical locations, which include the United States, Oceanic region, Latin America, and Brazil.

environment (also known as 'normal' (PVE)); role-playing (RP); and role-play/player vs player (RPPVP) (see Glossary for a description of these different play-styles).

Some people are surprised that there are so many people who like to spend time participating in online games (Jennings 2008). Yet online games have changed a lot over the past two decades, especially in terms of increasing social networks and shrinking physical distances. Participating in online games can be an extremely social activity, to such an extent that socialising with people across global networks is a common occurrence for most players. Online gaming is predominantly designed and produced as an activity that encourages socialisation on a global scale, and the many friendships and intimate relationships that form within these spaces are evidence of its success. Gamers who meet and fall-in-love, for example, often reside in different countries. Here, it is also important to note that gaming platforms continue to undergo rapid developments, to the point that it is now possible for gamers to connect with each other across games. Interface concepts such as Blizzard's Battlenet launcher, or Xbox Live's home page, for example, allow subscribers to see all of their friends online, even though they may be playing completely different games. This approach to online games places a much greater emphasis on the socialisation element of online gaming, and also works to promote a greater sense of community amongst gamers. While this direction in games is innovative and progressive, there are other issues such as sexism, homophobia and racism, which affect the way that gamers choose to portray their identities and socialise with others in WoW, which I discuss further in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

WoW, as a MMORPG essentially provides players with the means to interact and communicate with each other in real-time. It also allows multiple players to form groups and perform intricate tasks in order to complete objectives that can only be achieved by multiple players who cooperate with one another. Raids are an excellent example of how gamers (who are often unknown to each other) can come

together to achieve complex and multifaceted objectives that would otherwise be impossible to do in a solo situation. WoW's design also encourages players to join guilds, and the vast majority of players belong to guilds. There are many advantages to belonging to a guild, such as purchasing items from guild vendors, XP bonuses, and being a part of a supportive social network, made up of guild members (or 'guildies' as they are known informally) that are able to assist each other in completing objectives, including the formation of dungeon and raid groups made up of guild members. It could be argued that one of the strongest moviational factors for players to join guilds is the idea of having a supportive social network. Yet, it is important to note that guilds do not always last, as they sometimes fail due to in-fighting or inactive players, which often results in a guild becoming defunct or disbanded. Players sometimes leave a guild soon after joining due to reasons such as the guild not meeting their expectations, they prefer to play solo (guildless), or simply because they want to join another guild. Also, on occasion guilds can experience a mass exodus, where a large number of guild members leave at the same time due to irreconcilable differences, typically with player/s who are in charge of managing the guild. Therefore, it is common to see players leaving and 'trying-out' new guilds until they find one that suits their personality and/or play-style (this is discussed further in Chapter 6).

In many ways, online game environments reflect the everyday social values and norms that are experienced offline. Online role-playing games, however, are designed to appeal to many different types of players and incorporate a complex array of added extras that are born out of elements of fantasy and character creation (such as flying, achievement based rewards, dying and resurrection, and providing players with a myriad of choices related to appearance and gender portrayal). In many ways the internet offers people a new way to experience socialisation, and as an online game, WoW affords players opportunities to get to know one another without having to negotiate social differences (such as age, race, gender and sexuality) more easily than in offline environments. For example, I met another online gamer (who I call Steve) shortly after playing WoW for the first

time. He recruited me into his guild and we have been friends ever since. It would be fair to assume that if we had not met while playing WoW, we probably would never have met and become friends because not only do we live in different countries (New Zealand/Australia) but there is a gap in our age groups (late 30s/middle 20s), and we work in different types of occupation (academia/security services).

Unexpected friendships such as this are common in WoW and are a crucial element of most online games, which each have their own unique discourses and cultures. Furthermore, not all players behave in what is considered to be an appropriate manner, as there are some who purposely choose to annoy or aggravate other gamers. This is referred to by gamers as 'trolling'. Troll/trolling (aka. 'griefers' or 'griefing') refers to gamers who take pleasure in causing upset and negative responses in fellow players. In online games, the activities of "griefing" and "trolling" are intended to upset gamers, disrupt their play, and impact upon their enjoyment of the game. Kirman *et al.* (2012, 123) explains that this often involves "taking intentionally contrary views and being deliberately inflammatory to get a response". In order to maintain a sense of order, WoW incorporates their own form of social regulation and governance, making it possible for other gamers to report 'bad' behaviour. Players are able to keep in touch with their friends through an in-game system menu, which lets them know when friends log-in to the game. As a result, it is now possible to contact friends and send instant messages, regardless of which realm they are situated in (this only became possible with the Mist of Pandaria expansion). Within online role-playing games, avatars are the most visible representatives of online gamers. Yet, as argued by Bardzell and Bardzell (2008, 15):

> It is a mistake to think of avatars as online representations with a
> simple relationship to real-life selves; rather, they are subjectivities
> constituted by their actions in-world. These actions in-world are

conditioned both by real-life horizons and by the particular ways
users are able to interface with the virtual world.

This is a particularly interesting point that Bardzell and Bardzell highlight, as it is the ways in which players are able to interface with games on a social level that often determines whether or not they will return to play again. They also argue that many gamers invest hundreds of hours in their online worlds and as such, the friends they make, the expressions of intimacy they share, "and the personal conflicts they negotiate – all of these become a part of the offline person, in much the same way as going to a museum or out on a date becomes a part of someone" (Bardzell and Bardzell 2008, 15).

**Thesis outline**

Throughout this introductory chapter I have highlighted key aspects of this research, including the growing significance of online participation, particularly in MMORPG games such as WoW, where social interaction is a dominant feature and plays a critical role in the formation and maintenance of online relationships between gamers. I provide an introductory overview of WoW, as the majority of the research discussed in this thesis comes from participants' experiences of gaming within the digital landscape of Azeroth in WoW. In order to emphasise the diversity and complexity of WoW as an online game environment this chapter provides a brief overview of several elements of WoW, such as avatar constructions, guilds, and online socialisation. This research contributes to existing bodies of knowledge by furthering understandings of digital space across various fields of enquiry, including: feminist, queer, social and cultural geographies; gender and sexuality studies; cultural studies; computer studies; and, media studies.

Chapter 2 discusses literature and theoretical perspectives that are relevant to this study and which highlight several areas of discussion in relation to geographies of cyberspace, techno feminism and 'bodies' of performance, identity and queer

geographies, and geographies of emotion. In doing so, I highlight several examples that examine the ways in which gaming can be understood as an embodied activity – where the players occupy space in both online and offline worlds, and where the two-way, mutually constituted relationship between these two worlds is made more visible. In particular, I draw on Butler's (1990; 1993) work to examine gender and sexuality in gaming in relation to how gender and sexuality are experienced in WoW through performance.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodologies utilised for this study. Data were collected using: semi-structured face-to-face interviews; online forum discussions; online questionnaires; follow-up email questionnaires; screenshot captures (photo imagery), and autoethnography. The processes involved in data gathering and data analysis are outlined. Reflexive thinking was part of my autoethnographic approach, whereby I looked critically at my own position as both a researcher and a gamer, in relation to my participation in online games. The conduct of social science research in online spaces is becoming a common occurrence. Research ethics, however, continue to develop. The level of online socialisation that is required for this type of research provides much critical discussion around self-reflexive examinations of my role and the various processes involved (such as becoming an active member of several online game forum websites, and a WoW gamer).

Chapter 4 addresses the research question: How do gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW? I consider the role of avatars in games as representations of self and discuss the ways in which gamers are critical of, as well as identify and connect with their avatars. I then discuss the topic of gender-switching in games, paying particular attention to performances of gender that enable new ways of experiencing identity, and the ways in which boundaries between masculine and feminine subjectivities are challenged. Heteronormative and homophobic discourses are the norm in WoW, and the discussion in this chapter focuses, in particular, on identities that do not conform. I also examine the

various ways in which heterosexist and/or homophobic discourses are resisted within the socio-cultural landscapes of WoW. This chapter provides a critical analysis of how online games are fraught with discriminatory and oppressive discourses regarding gender and sexuality. I also discuss the various ways in which these dominant discourses are negotiated, resisted and transgressed within gaming culture.

Chapter 5 provides an examination of online relationships between gamers and addresses the second research question: What kinds of intimate and loving relationships do gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond? The spaces of online games are not typically thought of as spaces where people might meet an intimate partner. The internet has changed much about the ways in which people work, socialise and even fall in love. In this chapter I draw on empirical data, outlining the stories of participants and how they negotiated their online relationships in relation to emotions, sincerity, monogamy, spatiality and distance. I highlight discourses of love as they are constructed within online gaming discourse. In particular, I focus on how online relationships between gamers can be understood as embodied and felt experiences. This chapter also looks at the phenomenon of WoW weddings adds further emphasis to how gaming is understood as a sensorial experience in relation to geographies of emotion and affect.

Chapter 6 addresses the third and final research question: What kinds of gendered power relations are constructed in WoW's online gaming culture and how do these affect gamers' relationships both online and offline? Issues such as negative gender portrayals (masculine, feminine, and 'other'), misogyny, cybersex/erotic role-play, and infidelity/cybercheating are explored. While each of these elements provide examples of how online relationships can be understood as emotional and embodied experiences, they also bring to attention the ways in which offline values and norms are evident in online worlds. I draw on participants' gaming experiences, as well as my own. The data discussed in this chapter demonstrates

both the social and cultural context of online gaming as consisting of rich and diverse social networks, as well as the ways in which offline cultural values and norms have become embedded in game design and how these representations impact upon particular gamers within a male dominant socio-cultural online environment. In doing so, I contribute to an examination of the ways in which sexism and misogyny are present within WoW, gaming discourses, and the gaming industry overall.

Chapter 7 brings the thesis to a close and revisits the research aim and research questions. In looking forward, I propose avenues for future research and suggest how the themes explored in this thesis might be adapted and developed in order to expand this body of work which seeks to illustrate how players in online games 'do' sex and gender, as well as how they spatially negotiate their sexed and gendered identities, intimate relationships, and gendered power relations.

# CHAPTER 2: Literature review and theoretical perspectives

Over the past two decades a rapidly growing body of literature on digital space has emerged. It has focused on numerous dimensions of online phenomena, from graphic design to embodied role-play. Despite this, geographers have paid little attention to the topic of digital space, with even less attention being paid specifically to the gendered dimensions of online games. Geographers have largely ignored digital environments as avenues for building friendships and intimate relationships. As such, I am interested in this gap in the literature and wish to expand this area of study.

My research furthers understandings of the relationship between identity, intimacy and place for a group of 57 participants who have flirted with other gamers, or have met intimate partners while playing WoW. In this research I consider the mutually constituted relationship between people and place and the ways in which sexed and gendered identities are performed in relation to love and romance in online games. This study draws on a diverse range of literature (feminist, queer, poststructural, geographical, and media) that examines the: embodied and material realities of bodies; multiple ways in which gender is linked to place and space; and socio-spatial exclusionary practices that are based on differences in sexuality and gender. This broad range of perspectives affectively illustrates the diverse ways in which academics engage with the topic of embodiment across various scales. As such, I adopt a methodological approach that is guided by feminist poststructural and geographical theories. Using this particular approach prompts a nuanced and in-depth understanding of place and space. Davies and Gannon (2005, 319) note that doing research from a feminist poststructuralist perspective places emphasis on moving beyond what is already known. It also encompasses several principles that are central to the analytic approach of this study and which build upon multiple understandings. First, this includes understanding how performances of gender reveal "the ways in which sense is being made of gender … rather than an underlying essential truth about

sex or gender. As well as reflecting upon the ways in which "gendered discourses are neither transparent nor innocent". Second, feminist poststructuralist analysis aims to expose hidden 'truths' concerning notions of sex and gender and disrupt "that which is taken as stable unquestionable truth". Third, understandings of subjectivity are aligned with "gendered conditions of existence". As such, multiplicity and fluidity of subjectivities are central to thinking about change and agency, where the intersection of multiple discursive practices are conceptualised as subject positions, and where individuals are not fixed at any one point or location. Fourth, language is deconstructed to further highlight the ways in which the 'real' is constructed and in addition, gendered experiences are constituted through various discourses which "give rise to ambivalent understandings and emotions". Fifth, power relations are reflected across gender, in that they are always contingent and unstable, and where the role of the researcher is made visible, as "researchers are not separate from their data, nor should they be" (Davies and Gannon 2005, 319). I draw on various literary theories and discuss issues in relation to online identities and relationships, while paying particular attention to both Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of performativity, and Grosz' (1992, 1994) theories concerning sexed and gendered bodies. Examples of other work that adopt feminist, poststructural and geographical approaches include: Crang, Crang and May (1999); Cupples (2003); Holloway and Valentine (2001); Madge (2007); Madge and O'Connor (2002, 2005); and, Valentine and Holloway (2001, 2002).

Following on from this, I highlight how feminist poststructural theories aid in bringing about a greater understanding of contemporary topics, such as intimate relationships in online role-playing games. I do so by presenting a critical discussion of geographical literature on technology and online/offline spaces, which examines the pervasiveness of technology and the consequential merging of online and offline activities (see, for example, Blunt and Dowling 2006; Domosh and Seager 2001). I then draw on several examples of recent research that looks at the ways in which gaming can be understood as a lived and embodied activity – where gamers occupy space within both real and digital worlds, and where the

mutual constitution of these two worlds is made more visible (Crang *et al.* 1999; Featherston and Burrows 1995). I also review the work of some geographers (such as Crang *et al.* 1999; Madge and O'Connor 2005; Parr 2002) who offer examinations of online/offline experiences and identities, and who also provide new ways of theorising embodied identities in online spaces. As previously mentioned, this study provides an examination of people's experiences of love and intimacy in WoW, therefore, the final section of this chapter discusses geographies of love and emotion, which play a crucial role in the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

**Digital geographies**

As a discipline geography has endeavoured to understand socio-cultural phenomena through a scientific lens where forms of enquiry were derived from quantitative approaches (Valentine 2001). During this time, geography was heavily influenced by Descarte's notion of the mind and body as a binary, where the mind is perceived "as an immaterial entity and the body as a material substance defined by its bulk, shape and mass" (Hubbard *et al.* 2005, 98). Descarte's attempt to separate the mind from the body was so successful that this became the dominant theory for decades throughout many social science disciplines. As a result, the body's capacity as an information channel of 'felt' experience and awareness was disregarded and actively marginalised. Fortunately, however, there has been a growing number of theorists who have argued against the positioning of the mind and body, emotion and reason as separate systems (Biocca 1997). For example, Damasio (2005, xvi) argues that people use their bodies rather than some absolute experiential reality as a reference for the constructions they make of the world and that the "most refined thoughts and best actions, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows, use the body as a yardstick".

Other theorists (especially feminists and poststructuralists) have critiqued Descartés mind/body split by highlighting the ways in which dualistic notions create marginalised and 'othered' identities (Bell *et al.* 2001; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994). For example, Grosz (1994) argues against the 'corpses' of many former

cognitive approaches to knowledge, and instead focuses on the body and its material realities as an inscribed, experienced and lived organism. For the most part, technology is often regarded as something separate and apart from ourselves, however, theorists such as Haraway (1991) investigate the ways in which people's involvement with technology blurs the definitions of 'human' and 'cyborg'. As Haraway sees it, humans are already cyborgs. In a similar vein, virtual worlds are often dismissed as being distant or imaginary but several authors (Boellstorff 2008; Turkle 1995; Wajcman 2004) highlight the various ways in which relationships across real and digital worlds are interconnected and fluid, rather than dichotomous.

In the 1980s when technologies first began to influence and/or alter the ways in which people lived, a similar viewpoint to that of Descarte's was adopted. Technological determinism was a dominant theme and it characterised the relationship between people and technology as separate and disembodied. Some social scientists, however, responded to this, providing critiques which focused primarily upon social, rather than technical factors (Parr 2002). These proved to be very successful, to such an extent that Bingham (2005, 202) argues, "before it was the technical objects that were strong and the social elements weak, now the situation is reversed. The fundamental fact of the assumed division between the technical and the social, however, remains unchallenged". Bingham (2005, 202) makes a pertinent argument, stating:

> If we wish to take things seriously, we have to be prepared to put ourselves and our theories 'at risk' (Stengers 1997). For being willing to accept not just that technical is always already partially social (the easier move) but also that the social is always already partially technical (and, moreover, always has been) entails some pretty radical alteration in how we think and do cultural politics (see Dobres 2000; Ingold 2000; Lemonnier 1993).

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Theories of knowledge, often formerly marginalised, such as feminist and queer theories that focus on constitutive aspects of human life and identity, are gaining momentum and becoming increasingly more prominent. Within geography, diverse approaches are being used in a bid to comprehend place and space with an added emphasis on embodied spatialities. These particular studies are crucial in order to better understand how the technical is already partially social, and the social is already partially technical. For example, Longhurst (2009), Madge and O'Connor (2005), and Parr (2002) adopt a viewpoint that Bingham (2005, 202) describes as "socio-technically attuned", where they examine the various ways in which the 'social' and the 'technical' are mutually constitutive of each other. Amongst feminist geographers this interest in embodiment has grown and remained constant. Longhurst (2005, 91) states:

> The body – whether it be infant, child or adult – is a surface of social and cultural inscription; it houses subjectivity; it is a site of pleasure and pain; it is public and private; it has a permeable boundary that is crossed by fluids and solids; it is material, discursive and psychical.

Here, Longhurst provides a description of how bodies, at all times, are connected to their environments. Parr (2002) examines the embodied spaces of health and medical information on the internet, highlighting the ways in which identities are articulated relationally across boundaries of exclusion and social inclusion, as well as across both physical and virtual spaces. In examining these embodied spaces Parr (2002) reconceptualises the human body as a boundary figure that is caught between binary concepts, such as the technological/cultural, and the organic/natural. Del Casino and Brooks (2014) also examine the ways in which the online video-sharing technology of YouTube.com both challenge and reinforce normative notions of sex and gender within online public spaces. They emphasise the intertextual nature of YouTube as a new communication technology, where the techno-sociality of online and offline discursivities co-mingle in complex and

contradictory ways. With this in mind, one of the main focus points in this thesis is to provide an embodied understanding of people's relationships that exist in and across social, physical and digital environments.

Until recently, geography's view of online space was similar to that of a two-sided coin, one side was digital space, while the other was real-space. As a consequence, the mutually constituted relationship between digital and real spaces was often ignored.

> For some, these technologies are seen as facilitating, if not producing, a qualitatively different human experience of dwelling in the world; new articulations of near and far, present and absent, body and technology, self and environment (Crang *et al.* 1999, 1).

As Shaw and Warf (2009, 8) point out, dichotomies like game and player, or real and virtual, "fail to do justice to the depth and extent to which digital technologies have penetrated minds and bodies in contemporary capitalism, an age of bewildering time-space compression". Social and cultural geographers are now showing an interest in information technologies and digital space but the debates surrounding these have been slow to come to fruition. Consequently, as highlighted by Featherstone and Burrows (1996), past discussions of online spaces often imagine it as a disembodied, placeless and electronic sphere. Fortunately, recent studies are now highlighting the various ways in which both online and offline environments are influenced and shaped by people and their place-based routines and cultures (Holloway and Valentine 2001). For example, some of the text discussions that occur within online game forums are 'placeless', in the sense that they are available to anyone regardless of where they are located geographically, but the language used often reflects specific places and spaces, and other dominant cultural norms and practices.

Over the past few years, there has been a rapid progression in information technologies which has greatly influenced the design and application capacity for both internet websites and the habitation of online worlds. One outcome of this advancement is the increasing blurring of the line between 'public' and 'private'. Take for example, the growing trend of 'posting' personal video footage, such as childbirths and weddings on websites like *YouTube*. Longhurst (2009) points out that events such as childbirth are typically considered 'private' affairs. For example, childbirth usually only involves one's closest family members and their medical practitioner, and typically takes place within the privacy of one's own home and/or local hospital. Weddings are also typically considered to be private family affairs, however, millions of videos containing live childbirths and marriage ceremonies have been uploaded to online sites such as *YouTube*. This includes marriages that have been conducted within the digital spaces of games such as World of Warcraft and Second Life, which are available for public download. In many ways, these new technologies have begun to change not only the way that people view technology but they also aid in blurring the boundaries between public and private, digital and 'real' space.

**Techno-homes, digital worlds**

The majority of gamers play at home. While 'home' is not the central focus of this research, it is important to recognise it as a complex site that can and does affect the ways in which gamers play online. 'Home' means different things for different people and is imbued with a broad range of symbolic and ideological meanings (Valentine 2001). In general, most people still think of home as a place of privacy but the rapidly developing relationship between people and technology continues to overlap and confuse dominant discourse regarding what is public, private, away and home. Past geographical research points out that 'home is neither public nor private but both' (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Warf (2005, 296) states:

> So deep has been the penetration of cyberspace into everyday life
> that it makes little sense today to invoke simplistic dichotomies

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such as 'online' and 'offline', when these two domains have
become thoroughly shot through with each other. Cyberspace lies
at the boundary between the individual and society, the private
and the public, place and placelessness.

In attempts to move beyond the separation of private and public spheres, recent
studies investigate the integration of technology within the 'private' borders of
home-places and highlight the numerous ways in they are beginning to reshape
domestic life (Dodge and Kitchin 2009; Kwan 2002). For example, the introduction
of electronic devices, such as televisions and computers into homes has
transformed the way that people live, allowing them to receive and transmit
information on a global level and share it with other people and/or organisations.
As a result of these recent technological advancements, devices such as computers
and televisions effectively bring the 'public' outside world into the 'private' inner
spaces of our homes. Dodge and Kitchen (2009, 1345) argue that:

Much of this reshaping remains banal and occurs in subtle and
often hard to discern ways and it is socially significant … because
it marks a juncture point in the production of the so-called
'technological unconscious'.

More obvious examples of this reshaping that Dodge and Kitchin (2009) refer to
can be found when the inner 'private' spaces of our homes are taken outside into
the 'public' world and shown on social media sites like Facebook and YouTube,
via devices such as mobile/smart phones, portable notebooks and computers.

Gaming is an embodied activity, therefore, it is important to consider the home-
place because at present, home continues to be the primary physical location for
most gaming activities.[15] While at home, gamers are typically subject to the rules

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[15] This may change in the future if gaming platforms are increasingly designed to accommodate
applications that are more mobile.

and social protocols that govern the home space. Blunt and Dowling (2006, 2) describe home as "an imaginary that is imbued with feelings". It is also a space that is part of an intrinsically 'spatial imaginary' (a network of intersecting ideas and feelings), "which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 2). Feminist thinking has played a pivotal role in relation to the conceptual development of 'home', especially where gender is concerned, and it has consistently brought to light the various ways in which gender affects people's lived experiences (both real and digital) and their imaginaries of home.

Participating in online games makes it possible for a person to socialise and share a myriad of experiences with other people anywhere in the world, and all within the privacy of their own home. As such, digital environments, such as those created for game-play, are often considered 'safer' places for individuals wanting to 'try out' alternative identities. This is, in part, is due to the lack of physical proximity to other people. For example, gamers can create virtual characters as representations of self but the identity of the 'real' person behind the avatar often remains unknown. Some studies show that online personas are not always accurate portrayals of people (see, for example, Lee and Hoadley 2006). Yet, people often discover a greater sense of safety and liberation from the real-world (Taylor 2006).

Accessing the worldwide web from the space of one's own home is now a common occurrence, and it is reflective of a dyadic and mutually constitutive relationship between real and digital space (Madge and O'Connor 2005). The literature I highlight above allows for a more inclusive understanding of the ways in which digital geographies interact with everyday life through the interconnectedness between physically embodied space and digital space. As stated by Shapiro (2010, 25): "by examining how technology has created new physical and social possibilities for gender we can learn a lot about how our modern technological world is changing who we are in fundamental ways". Therefore, in a technological

and media savvy age, where people are able to gain access to global information, and spend time in both real and digital environments, the implications are significant.

**Techno feminism and 'bodies' of performance**

Discussions of embodied geographies highlight the ways in which the body occupies space. This is an intriguing topic because so often the body is overlooked. With this in mind, Pile's (1996) work examines how bodies are also spaces in their own right. Pile (1996, 209) suggests that bodies are not passive objects that "simply have a space and are a space". Rather, the body is made up of "object relations", such as family, nation, movies, and social media. They each draw their own "maps of desire, disgust, pleasure, pain, loathing, love. They negotiate their feelings, their place in the world" (Pile 1996, 209). In more recent work, these discussions have been applied to digital spaces and 'virtual geographies'. Kinsley (2013a, 3), for example, states:

> Whereas earlier work addressing speculative, or imaginary, 'cyberspaces' evoked a separate, disembodied dimension of spatial experience, much of the research reviewed here demonstrates the imbricated nature of the constituents of a given sociotechnical milieu. Even so, in some accounts there remains a faint implication of a foreign automatism that 'replaces' human agency. This highlights the difficult understanding that we have of the abstract yet fundamental relationship between 'the human' and 'the technical', frequently held as separate and yet intimately intertwined.

Kinsley (2013a, 8) goes on to argue for a means of studying "contemporary sociotechnical situations that recognizes the inherently material character of 'virtual' geographies". Shaw and Warf (2009, 2) take this a step further by examining games as 'worlds of representation', where they discuss the placed,

racialized, gendered and politicized quality of digital game spaces. They also point out:

> Equally concerning is that video games worlds remain steeped in racialized representations (Jansz and Martis, 2007), including the near universal portrayal of white video game protagonists. This privileging of the white normative user is still widely prevalent in new forms of media and cyberspace (Lovink, 2005), creating highly racialized (and often racist) virtual topographies. Despite these racist and hypersexual representations, whether or not the affective experience of the player is universal (that is, cross-cultural) or specific to the social world of individual users is largely an unexamined question.

Shaw and Warf also note, however, that discussions focusing squarely on "video games as representations miss the way in which these worlds *affect* users on an embodied, preconscious level" (Shaw and Warf 2009, 2, emphasis in original). I discuss further elements of emotion and affect later in this chapter.

Rose's (2012, 178) examination of fantasy and desire in films shows that the "key point about fantasy is that the subject need not only be the audience of a fantasy. The subject may also imagine that they participate in the fantasy as well". In this sense, Rose's statement is undoubtedly relevant to gamers who share close connections with their online avatars. Rose (2001, 1) states:

> There's an awful lot of hype around 'the visual' these days. We're
> often told that we now live in a world where knowledge as well as
> many forms of entertainment are visually constructed, and where
> what we see is as important, if not more so, than what we read.

This particular comment is relevant to studies focusing on internet gaming, as while text communication is undoubtedly an essential part of online gaming,

research also shows that an avatar's appearance can affect the ways in which other players respond to them. Take, for example, Lee and Haodley's (2006) experiment with their classroom students concerning the online role-playing game Second Life. This involved several of their students playing as opposite sex characters, while other students opted to make their avatars unattractive. In doing so, the students were able to experience the ways in which real-world phenomena such as stereotypes, social status and discrimination are transferred into digital worlds.

Lee and Haodley (2006, 386) write that the boys playing as virtual girls noticed things like receiving "freebies", and having to deal with flirtatious behaviour from other male online characters. Avatar attractiveness was also a factor in this study, and in Second Life it is unusual to see 'ugly' avatars. The students in Lee and Haodley's study who chose to transgress this norm reported having difficulties being accepted by others. One student simply said, "If you are ugly in a world where you can choose to be beautiful, it's bad for you." While another stated that "cool avatars are more popular. … I designed my avatar to be very unattractive, and as I would walk up to groups of people, they would all scatter and avoid talking to me" (Lee and Haodley 2006, 387).

While there may be a vast array of avatar images available in various games, the politics concerning sexual subjective identity in the real-world often affects the choices that gamers make in digital environments, as evidenced in Lee and Haodley's study. In this context, being 'ugly' was a disempowering experience for their students. Their findings, however, are helpful as they highlight some of the ways in which real-world politics concerning body image and beauty can also become culturally dominant in online spaces. Many of the 'anxieties' raised by Brown (2012b, 544) regarding intersectional relationships to gender and sexuality are evident in studies such as this, where "the association of sexuality with particular forms of physical ableism and corporeal beauty" involves important socio-cultural normativities that travel with users when they inhabit online identities and socialise within those spaces. As discussed, there are certain

elements of virtual reality that remain closely linked to real-world politics. Yet there are also other elements that are less constrained by real-world prejudice. Lee and Hoadley's (2006, 387) students, for example, also commented on how they found it easier to socialise with others within an online environment, stating that "interacting in a digital world is not so much a lesson in diversity as an equalizer". Consequently, some found it was easier to find others with similar interests because their conversations were not hindered by various offline barriers, such as cultural differences.

Butler (1990) argues that gendered identities are *always* created out of fluid, dynamic, performances, whether simulated or real. In this study, I argue that virtual bodies are created and represented through a person's 'real' world understanding of gendered identities. Similarly, Grosz (1992, 42) states:

> Thus, I am interested in exploring the ways in which the body is psychically, socially, sexually, and discursively or representationally produced, and the ways, in turn, bodies reinscribe and project themselves onto their sociocultural environment so that this environment both produces and reflects the form and interests of the body.

Both Grosz and Butler interpret the body as an object that is woven into environments. As such, bodies are more than just individual projects. Rather, bodies are inflected by social practices and representations, while simultaneously subject to the disciplining gaze of others (Butler 1990, 1993; Grosz 1992, 1994; Foucault 1977). Conforming to this gaze is sometimes resisted, while at other times it is not. Also, the practice of self-discipline and bodily vigilance becomes the individual's choice, where sometimes it is exercised, whilst at other times corporeal freedom is expressed. Del Casino (2009, 57) states that many spaces with "their apparently reified identities, are constantly being challenged through mundane acts and practices as individuals and groups transgress the so-called

boundaries" of those spaces. Paradoxically, the spaces of online games both reinforce and resist many real-world hegemonic norms. The struggle 'for' and 'against' particular norms surface regularly in the public spaces of online games, such as the push for gay rights, which is sometimes demonstrated via virtual gay pride parade marches. As in the real-world, these marches are a form of direct resistance to patriarchal norms, and are held and celebrated every year in WoW across multiple servers by gay gamers and supporters.

Del Casino (2009, 137) also suggests that, in this sense, "virtual community spaces, like other spaces, are subject to social relations of power, to pressures to conform to certain socialized norms, and to sanctioned rules appropriate to a particular community". Madge and O'Connor (2005, 94) argue that new theorizations about online spaces need to "combine a consideration of liminal cyberspaces with everyday corporeality". In earlier work Hillis (1999, 167) also emphasises this point, stating "the degree to which theorists have remained unwilling to look at our bodies as powerful means of countering the hegemonizing power released by the nature-culture dichotomy is perplexing". Hillis goes on to state that the inclusion of human bodies into our understanding of social relations would aid in making a broader and more defensible (albeit continually shifting) material base from which theory would develop.

There has been much discussion concerning digital worlds, avatar creation, and the possibilities that they present for a virtual 'second life' (Boellstorff 2008; Meadows 2007), and the subject of gender and games continues to be an important part of these discussions. While there is parity in gaming between genders, this only applies in a broad sense, as the actual gender balance within particular games can differ significantly. Also, women are under-represented in the games industry, with the majority of design and development coming from men. Furthermore, women continue to be portrayed in games as sexual objects of desire, 'damsels in distress' and in other submissive and/or derogatory roles (Yee 2014). It is important to recognise, however, the steady increase in the number of women

playing games every year, as well as the growing number of women involved in the games industry. Also, while digital representations continue to portray women in derogatory or submissive roles, there has also been a greater shift towards including virtual women who are equally as strong as their male counterparts (Schott and Thomas 2008).

Turkle (1999) argues that playing with identity and the trying out of new personae is conceivably more explicit in online 'role-playing' communities than in other gaming communities. Gamers participate in online games as role-playing avatars but they can also become involved in other online communities (such as forums, bulletin boards and chat rooms) where other gamers meet up to discuss current issues. The personas that gamers portray in these online forum environments are sometimes considered to be further extensions of their in-game character/s. There are countless ways that people choose to re-present themselves as virtually embodied personalities, however, the reasons for doing so can vary markedly. For example, Turkle (1999, 643-644) states that "for many people, joining online communities means crossing a boundary into highly charged territory. Some feel an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation, some a sense of relief. Some sense the possibilities for self-discovery". This research explores these connections and highlights the constitutive and mutually defining relationships that exist between bodies, place and their wider socio-spatial relations (Grosz 1992). Digital technologies also allow people to re-think their socio-spatial subjective positioning Wajcman (2004, 2) argues:

> New biomedical technologies that allow us to remodel the human
> body, profile individuals and populations, and commodify nature
> in unprecedented ways are changing the idea of what it means to
> be human, and even our sense of self. These developments call for
> some radical rethinking both of the processes of technological
> innovations and of their impact on the culture and practices of
> everyday life.

In this quote, Wajcman discusses the extent to which technologies are being introduced into the everyday lives of people. From refrigerators to keyboards, we rely on technology to aid us in our daily pursuits of work, home life and leisure. In popular culture there has been an increase in the number of avatars being portrayed in movie roles – where it is possible for characters in movies (such as *Avatar* and *The Matrix*) to transfer their consciousness, from their 'real' body into an avatar body, and back again. In these instances, a person's characteristics, such as their personality, gender, and sexuality become manifest via an alternate body. The presence of avatars within online websites and communities has grown over the past two decades, and they are now widely used as online representations by many people.

In MMORPGs gendered avatars meet certain aesthetic design standards, which are influenced by cultural norms (Brenick *et al.* 2007). Gendered bodies are often exaggerated with male bodies illustrated as hyper-masculine, muscular and violent, and female bodies as hyper-feminine and highly sexualised. Research shows that these stereotypes are held not only by gamers but also by non-gamers (Dill and Thill 2007). Brenick *et al.* (2007, 396) state that the advancements made within computer technology over the past several years "has made it possible for graphic depiction and content of video games to become increasingly more visually realistic, blurring the lines between what is real and what is not." The degree to which online identities become embodied can vary significantly (Jackson and Vares 2013). Therefore, as highlighted by Jackson and Vares (2013, 1), the relationship between individual's "embodied self-understandings and post-feminist media bodies is multi-layered and cannot be reduced to linear effects". This emphasises the idea that audiences (such as gamers) are not passive subjects. Rather, they are often not only aware of gender dynamics and the hypersexualisation of media images but they are also critical of them (also see Vares *et al.* 2011).

Gaming is sometimes presumed to be a disembodied experience and it is important therefore to examine elements of embodiment and connectedness with online lives and online relationships (Illouz 2007). Experiences with technology are increasingly becoming recognised as 'material' and tangible (Kinsley 2013a). Take, for example, the 'everyday' occurrence of people accessing the internet via computers and other technological devices to search for potential friends and/or intimate partners. This has become a common occurrence over the past decade and advancements in design and technology actively strive to produce games and other online applications that allow people to feel more 'connected' with their virtual embodiments or online personas (Illouz 2007). Earlier studies attempted to separate real-life from virtual reality, yet these binary distinctions are now viewed as limiting, and some gamers (who adopt key components of their online worlds into their lives and identities) find this simplistic view inaccurate in relation to their own gaming experiences (Bell 2002). More recent studies examining queer identities in online spaces have critiqued much of this earlier work, which I discuss further in the following section (Pulos 2013; Schmieder 2008; Shaw 2009, 2012a; Sunden 2009).

**Queer geographies**

In the early 1990s, queer theory emerged out of gay, lesbian and feminist studies, and effectively demonstrated a new way of examining sexed and gendered embodiment (Browne *et al.* 2009; Cornwell and Lundgren 2001). Today, it is a critical body of work that continues to be adopted for studies which explore categories of sex, sexuality and gender. Johnston *et al.* (2000, 667) state:

> Queer theory's relationship with geography is two-way, with one increasingly recognizing the implications of the other. Simply put, queer theory demands that geographers recognize how hetero-normativity can blatantly or subtly taint the geographies that we write and research about. Here sexuality's implications for exploring new and/or different geographies is highlighted.

Queer theory plays an important role in this study because this research aims to examine the production of space whilst gaming, and playing with gender and sexuality. Queer geographies also allow for an engagement with feminist and poststructural thought, and aids in providing an in-depth critique of the relevance of sexual norms and practices of exclusion to a wide-range of concerns (Johnston and Longhurst 2008; 2010). Brown *et al.* (2009, 3) argue that even banal everyday spaces are structured by sexuality, therefore, the sexualisation of space "does not only apply to spaces where people might expect to engage in explicitly sexual activity of some kind". As such, performances of gender and sexuality are not separate, rather, they shape the socio-cultural assumptions that are present within relationships.

Queer theory has been used to deconstruct notions of normative heterosexuality. As such, geographers examining these issues highlight the ways in which patriarchal social relations work to reinforce heterosexist relations within various places, such as the home (Johnston and Valentine 1995) and the work-place (McDowell 1997). Consequently, research on geographies of heterosexuality highlights the heterogeneity of different kinds of heterosexuality, which has demonstrated that these too are spatially specific. Browne *et al.* (2009, 10) argue:

> Heterosexual space is variously sexualised or desexualised by and for
> different people at specific times, with heterosexuals caught up in
> various modes of self-production and self-surveillance ... In using
> queer theory to deconstruct normative heterosexuality there has been
> a recognition that some heterosexualities are 'queerer' or more
> dissident than others and can themselves pose a challenge to
> established heteronormative power relations.

Hubbard's (2009) work reflects upon the ways in which queer geography has shifted from a focus on 'the margins', to a focus on normalising discourse within

the discipline. Hubbard also states that it is becoming common practice for geographers (who do not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), or have not experienced any form of homophobia) to use queer theory as a way of revealing the fractured and multiple geographies of heterosexuality.

**Cyber-gender / cyber-queer**

Eklund's (2011) examination of WoW shows that gender is performed within a social context that is dominated by heterosexual norms. Therefore, it is important to recognise the presence of gender-normativity in daily interactions because 'place' is important when examining culturally specific constructions of gender and sexuality, and what constitutes masculinity/femininity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality within particular places. Furthermore, the ways in which dominant notions of gender and sex influence everyday life and societal settings is often taken for granted. Ultimately, these play an influential role in relation to how people choose to interact with one another, with gender and sex often being used to reinforce positions of power within many social relationships (Butler 1990; 1993). In Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) hegemonic ideals of gendered and sexual norms persist, and similar to many Western societies, NZ is also influenced by global trends that are relayed via popular media channels. These trends, however, are in turn affected by different socio-spatial contexts that become unique to NZ, Māori culture, and post-colonialism (Mansvelt 2005).

Butler's work (1990; 1993) contributes to advancing the idea that gender difference is fluid and capable of change through self-reflexive practice. In particular, Butler argues that gender identities do not pre-exist but are constructed and normalised through everyday routinised cultural practices. It is in this sense that Butler's (1990; 1991; 1993) theory of gender performativity aids in furthering understandings of marginalised identities that are positioned 'outside' of stereotypical and gender-normative frameworks.

Butler (1990) and Goffman (1978) both argue that identity is more than just an attribute. Goffman (1978), for instance, argues that identities are not shaped by the world as a whole but by our interactions within certain environments, and that people 'perform' their identity according to how they wish to be perceived. Butler (1990) examines the work of established theorists such as Foucault, Irigaray, and Kristeva, and argues that when it comes to identity, gender is also a performance. Butler (1990, 71) claims:

> Always already a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasized body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the 'literal' and the 'real'.

Here Butler (1990) argues against the assumption that the 'natural' body is the physical body. Rather, this perspective views all bodies as cultural constructions, regardless of their (fleshy) materiality or (virtual) immateriality. Balsalmo (1996) and Haraway (1991) also question the naturalisation of physical bodies given that technological procedures such as cosmetic surgery have forever changed the societal perceptions of what is considered to be a 'natural' body. Research by Fox, Bailenson and Tricase (2013) shows that the bodies of avatars that gamers use to play and socialise with can affect their sense of self. They argue that there are 'carryover' effects from the avatars that people 'wear', which influence their behaviours outside of the digital environments:

> Women can be affected negatively by the avatars they wear. Women may be at risk for experiencing self-objectification and developing greater rape myth acceptance, and these attitudes may influence their behaviours both on- and offline. Future studies need to clarify the extent of these effects as well as how avatars can

be used to elicit positive changes in attitudes and self-image. In the meantime, users of video games, online social worlds, and other virtual environments should be made aware of the potential effects and implications of the avatars they embody (Fox, Bailenson and Tricase 2013, 936).

As Fox, Bailenson and Tricase (2013) explain, people are not always comfortable with their bodies, or with the bodies of others. Online gaming spaces are often acknowledged for their ability to provide people with alternative ways of expressing themselves. What is less often referred to, however, is the inability of other gamers and some game designers to accept queer game-play. The internet is often utilised by people as a place to express individuality in ways that transgress 'everyday' real-world norms and therefore, it has the potential to challenge the dominance of heteronormativity (MacCallum-Stewart 2008; Roberts and Parks 1999). It is also important to note that the "majority of social spaces on the internet bear a remarkable resemblance to real-world locales. As such, many online interactions are in fact situated in real-world protocols" (Kitchin 1998, 395). Consequently, many theorists are now starting to view the internet as a socio-technical construction that is, in many ways, an extension of human reality (Landstrom 2007). Furthermore, these new insights concerning online spaces aid in highlighting the ways in which it is possible to create and maintain multiple gender and sexual identities, all of which are generated from a single physical body. This research will make a significant contribution to queer studies, as it further "complicates understandings of queer identities, communities and spaces within the geographical sexuality and space literature" (Oswin 2008, 93).

Butler's (1990) notion of 'gender trouble' is well suited for the examination of performances of gender-bending in digital gaming spaces. 'Gender-bending', 'gender-switching', and 'transgendering' are terms used to describe the act of swapping genders in online games using avatars. Avatar appearances can vary across a wide range of design templates but in role-playing games in particular, it

is typical for avatar bodies to be portrayed in ways which hyper-sexualise their dimensions, where they are pictured as *more* masculine or feminine than 'real life' bodies. This has also been a notable topic of examination in other areas, such as transgender studies, where trans identities adopt exaggerated forms of masculinity or femininity (Rosenberg and Oswin 2014), and in gender discourse research, where hypermasculinity is the dominant paradigm (Salter and Blodgett 2012). It has become common for most games (especially role playing) to offer a myriad of choices in relation to how gamers can re-create their 'self' virtually via a range of avatar design templates. Taylor (2003) notes how utilising these templates allows players to alter their avatar's features, and can include changing their age, race, gender, skin colour, hair colour, body shape, facial features, and more.

Butler (1990) highlights the potential for transgressive politics within representations of heterosexual constructs, yet this is rarely seen in mainstream games. Madge and O'Connor (2005, 85) argue that "cyberspace is a performative space, one where new subject positions are 'tried out' in and through practices of everyday life". Indeed, recent studies show that the majority of gamers (both men and women) have experimented with switching genders at least once while gaming (Ducheneaut *et al.* 2009; MacCallum-Stewart 2008). It is also important to note that these particular terms are academic and not used by gamers. In fact, for gamers, the act of gender-switching is a common-place practice and as such, it is viewed as a 'norm' within gaming culture. As a result, when intimate online relationships occur between gamers, it is not unusual to find that their virtual self/avatar are either transgender, gay or lesbian.

The digital is a virtual realm, in that the imaginary plays a crucial role in its development as an actual space. People often use online spaces to re-present their self in a whole new way (whether it be experimenting with sex and gender, or for more practical purposes, such as women who prefer to game as men in order to avoid attention from other male gamers). Yet, there are many elements that define

digital spaces as more than just imaginary spaces. For example, relationships that are formed in online spaces occur between real 'flesh and blood' people, and the emotions that develop from these interactions 'feel' very real to the people experiencing them (and in some cases, *more* intense than any other offline relationship) (Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Games such as WoW are explicitly designed to enhance a player's level of connection in ways that evoke emotion and affect (Shaw and Warf 2009), and it is with this in mind that I argue that online games need to be better understood as more than 'fun and games'. I discuss this in detail in the following section.

**Geographies of emotion and affect**

Just as gender and sexuality make up the spaces of everyday life, so too do emotions. Geographies of emotional life encompass an important new field of research within feminist geography. In the past, geography "often presented us with an emotionally barren terrain, a world devoid of passion, spaces ordered solely by rational principals". This is not because geographers are incapable of expressing emotion but rather, "the difficulties in communicating the affective elements at play in the topographies of everyday life" has created a void between geography and "emotional entanglements" (Davidson *et al.* 2005, 1-2).

Unfortunately, the field of emotional geographies is still marginalised, which is in part due to a politics of knowledge, where greater value is still being placed on masculinist approaches to research, and the adoption of core elements such as detachment, objectivity and rationality. Elements such as engagement, subjectivity and irrationality, however, have been devalued and frequently feminised (Anderson and Smith 2001). As Davidson *et al.* argue, "clearly, our emotions *matter*" (2005, 1: emphasis in original). Bondi (2005) argues that the gendered basis of knowledge production is likely to be a key reason why emotions have previously been neglected in geography. The study of emotions by geographers, however, continues to grow and contribute to critical perspectives that would otherwise be limited by conventional scholarships. Affectual geographies are

useful when considering online games in order to understand the creation of particular digital atmospheres that 'travel' around the globe. Shaw and Warf (2009, 2) suggest:

> Through the increasing sophistication of virtual worlds, video games have become progressively more affective. The genre has always operated on representational and affective levels, but the literature on video games has largely failed to capture this latter dimension, thus implicitly assuming that the player is an incorporeal being numb to the virtual topographies he (or, less frequently, she) navigates.

Shaw and Warf (2009) note the 'affective' element of games and as such, affectual geographies are connected with shared emotions that are felt within a particular cultural context. They also state that "exploring virtual space is increasingly an experiential negotiation ripe with affective potentials. As such, the relationship between the player's body and his or her gaming space is not a simple duality" (Shaw and Warf 2009, 8). As highlighted by Thrift (2004, 59), "there is no stable definition of affect". Yet, affect implies that "the world is made up of billions of happy or unhappy encounters, encounters which describe a 'mindful connected physicalism' consisting of multitudinous paths with intersect" (Thrift, 1999, 302). Using this particular view, affect can be seen as encompassing a mixture of bodies (or entities), where "one body is said to act on another, and the other receives traces of the first" (Deleuze, 1978, unpaginated). WoW weddings are one such example, as emotion and affect exists as part of a shared consciousness that is derived from emotions such as joy. When a wedding is 'crashed', however, by unwanted guests, these emotions may turn quickly into affectual geographies of anger and disgust.

Shared felt intensities – between and within bodies – create an affectual gaming experience. WoW operates implicitly at this level. As such, I also utilise Griffith's (1997, cited in Thrift 2008, 224) affect program emotion theory, which is derived

from a hermeneutic of emotions such as "surprise, fear, anger, disgust, contempt, sadness, and joy". Griffith states that the same responses occur in all cultures and that these patterns of responses exchange information with other processes. Similarly Shaw and Warf (2009, 7) highlight affect in relation to gaming experiences, and view it as being linked in ways that are "precognitive, unconscious, and embodied reactions to on-screen representations" (Shaw and Warf 2009, 7). They continue:

> Practically all video game players have at one stage been so immersed in a gaming world that a synergy occurs between what happens on screen and what happens to the body ... In this sense, the link between affect and representation is one of contraction: as the player navigates virtual space, the representations contemplated become embodied, felt, experienced, and lived (Shaw and Warf 2009, 9).

In this thesis, gamers are understood as beings who are connected to their online experiences, and who feel emotions and affect through the embodiment of their onscreen representations. Longhurst *et al.* (2008, 208) state that "bodies produce space and knowledge, and space and knowledge produce bodies". This two-way, mutually constitutive relationship between bodies and knowledge is experienced via a wide ranging scale of felt emotions. We are now seeing emotion being brought to the fore in more recent research and for the most part it is arguably the substantial contributions of feminist geographers whose work focuses on bodily issues and embodiment that is responsible for this growth of interest (Davidson and Milligan 2004). As a result, recent studies by feminist geographers have begun to examine various social phenomena through the lens of emotional geography (see, for example, Johnston 2006; Longhurst *et al.* 2008; Smith *et al.* 2009).

While it is indisputable that emotions are felt and experienced via the body, it is also true that they are inseparable from our wider social environments, as they are

directly influenced by the broader social power relations that are in-play (Bondi 2005). Longhurst *et al.* (2008, 210) explain:

> The consideration of emotions seems crucial in any attempt to understand how 'lives are lived and societies made' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 7). Different places and bodies are imbued with different emotional and affective geographies (Tolia Kelly 2006). To neglect feelings and emotions, therefore, is to exclude key relations through which places and bodies become meaningful.

The geography of women's fear has been a key component in legitimising emotion as a relevant research topic, as it effectively shows that emotions such as fear are influenced by social and environmental factors (Panelli *et al.* 2004; Valentine 1989). As such, geographers have examined a range of spatial scales through the lens of emotion, beginning with the body and expanding out to the community, city and countryside. Notably, however, although 'love' is an emotional component of any intimate relationship, geographers have paid little attention to this particular emotion and the feelings associated with being in-love. Geographers Morrison *et al.* (2013, 2) argue for:

> A conceptualization of love as something that is spatial, relational and political. We present possibilities for thinking critically about love in all its various guises. Despite the claims of some that love simply 'is' (i.e. it is 'natural', deeply felt, visceral and impossible to articulate), like any other notion it needs to be held up to critical scrutiny. It cannot be separated out from spatiality. It is relational and deeply political. We want to open up love's pleasures and pains by focusing on spatiality, relationality and politics.

Similarly, there has been a lack of research that examines emotional connections and relationships within online spaces, and it is the purpose of this research to

contribute to this emerging field of research within feminist geography. Not only do Morrison *et al.* (2013, 8) argue for an understanding of love and emotion that is intricately connected to place, space and politics but they also highlight the ways in which emotions are bound to the body, stating:

> Bodies are shaped by love and in the process become oriented to others – other objects, people and places. Some acts of love are deemed accepted, are enshrined in law and celebrated in particular places – such as heterosexual weddings.

Given that digital space is often thought of as disconnected and disembodied, failing to acknowledge the importance of emotions and affect within online spaces only aides in the reinforcement of hegemonic, masculinist, and disembodied discourses. Emotive elements in gender and sexuality studies are featuring more prominently within feminist research, however, there is also a lack of attention, as intense emotions such as love and romance continue to be over-shadowed by other foci. Literature relating to emotion plays a crucial role in this study, as participants were asked to articulate their emotions – 'to embody [them] linguistically' (Davidson and Milligan 2004, 523).

**Online-romance**

The experiences of physical and emotional attraction, and of falling in love, are typically associated with intense emotions. Therefore, this research has important implications for the field of emotional geographies, given that it examines the performance of sexed and gendered identities surrounding love and romance in the online spaces of WoW. Love and romance are expressed in various ways via the internet. Bardzell and Bardzell (2008) note that while some people prefer to converse in chatrooms, others prefer to talk to people in more expansive digital environments, such as in MMORPGs, where communication *and actions* are performed via avatars. In instances such as this, avatars represent individual and personal creations, and people typically have the option of moulding and shaping

the appearance of their avatar. However they choose to do this, there are usually numerous options available for selecting various styles and body types. Once created, avatars are essentially utilised as representations of the people who are speaking through them. Turkle (1995, 184) describes these online gaming environments as "laboratories for the construction of identities", where people are able to 'play' and try-on new identities. Ducheneaut *et al.* (2009, 1151) state:

> Researchers have long been fascinated with the link between online identity and offline self. Recent work [by Bessier *et al.* (2007)] shows that users realize some aspects of their "ideal selves" through their avatar, which may have positive implications for those with low self-esteem.

There is a rapidly growing body of research that examines similar issues related to avatars and online identities, such as ethnicity swapping (Nakamura 2000, 2009), cybersex and/or cyber-cheating via avatars (Brown 2012a; Kolotkin *et al.* 2012), and the embodiment of alter egos (Yee and Bailenson 2006, 2014). Over the past decade, evidence shows that people in online games do 'fall in love' via their avatars (Kolotkin *et al*. 2012; Doring 2002a & 2002b; TVNZ 2009). In fact, the use of avatars as representations of self in digital environments is now a common-place occurrence. Furthermore, due to the rapid evolution of technological and graphic interfaces, it is also becoming increasingly possible for avatars to 'perform' human emotions (such as crying and laughing) and actions (such as getting married and making love - but not necessarily in that order), which ultimately aid in making their performances look and *feel* more real (Doring 2002a). Ben-Ze'ev (2004, xi) states:

> Nowadays, one of the most exciting social, as well as romantic, sites to visit is cyberspace. At any moment, millions of people across the globe are surfing that space, socializing with each other or having romantic affairs. Their number is growing by the minute

> … Why are emotions so intense in this seemingly imaginary
> world? Are we witnessing the emergence of new types of emotions
> and romantic relationships?

Although it is common for discourses to utilise oppositional terms such as online/offline and real/digital, Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 2) argues that "cyberspace is part of reality" and that it is incorrect to regard it as the direct opposite of real-space due to the simple fact that "online relationships are real relationships". Online relationships, in this sense, require interaction. While one might read a romance novel and experience emotions, it is argued that the interactive nature of online spaces make these kinds of emotions more intensely felt (Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Turkle 1995; Whitty and Carr 2006). Digital communications have introduced a new type of discourse which has influenced the way that many people choose to pursue personal and intimate relationships and the above examples highlight some dynamic, yet fundamental changes. The way that individuals choose to socialise and express themselves, as well as how they experience intimate relationships are changing due to modern-day engagements with online spaces and the various forms of communication technologies that are constantly emerging.

Many people who participate in MMORPGs typically play for a few hours each day, with more 'serious' gamers playing six or more hours. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that friendships form between players, with some developing romantically. Yet, as Woleslagle (2007, 60) argues, "when the topic of online romance is broached sceptics are still likely to say, 'but it is not real!'" It is important, however, to have a contextualised understanding of these relationships and the environments in which they are evolving. Online relationships that develop within gaming spaces, for example, typically evolve through in-game text chat and/or speech programs such as Ventrilo, TeamSpeak (these are both audio only), and Skype (which can be used with or without camera). It is through this type of communication that such intense bonds are sometimes formed:

Those who locate their true selves online, as opposed to offline, will feel that their online relationships develop much more quickly than do their non-internet relationships, these relationships will be close and meaningful, and they will be motivated to move these relationships into their face-to-face lives (McKenna *et al.* 2002, 13).

These examples highlight the ways in which online actions and text communications can affect an entire community, as not only relationships but their surrounding communities are formed and established via in-game text/chat communication. Similarly, Shaw and Warf (2009, 10) note that online game environments are becoming increasingly affective landscapes, "and once the player turns his or her attention to the experience of space, he or she is shaped not by the representations of space, but of the body's affective articulation in another world." Ben Ze'ev (2004, 148) argues:

Online relationships are sometimes criticized on the grounds that participants invest many hours a day simply chatting with people who are almost strangers to them. While it is clear that too much of a good thing can be harmful, in comparison to prevailing alternatives in modern society – such as watching television, or playing computer games – chatting with strangers about everything that is on one's mind is at least of equal value, and may be the better alternative.

Ben Ze'ev makes a good point by stressing the value of online communications, and he also brings attention to the ways in which playing computer games can be viewed as a highly social activity. Clearly, for many people, their primary reason for participating within these online environments is based on the social aspect of gaming, and the maintaining of friendships and/or intimate relationships (Yee 2006c). Whitty and Carr (2006, 10, emphasise in original) argue that, "in contrast to the negative view of online interactions, research has demonstrated that '*real*'

relationships can be initiated online and can move successfully offline". Parks and Roberts (1998), for example, found that 93% of their participants reported forming at least one personal relationship during their time in a MUD gaming environment that continued afterwards offline (also see Parks and Floyd 1996).

Today's MMORPG environments expand beyond MUD text based communication, as they utilise full-body avatars as personal representations of the self and interact with entire communities of players. Whitty and Carr (2006) state that as well as providing a space for the creation of new identities, many theorists have argued that online environments offer a place for people to be more sexually liberated. Turkle (1995, 21) in her earlier work also noted a similar finding, stating that "many people who engage in netsex say that they are constantly surprised by how emotionally and physically powerful it can be". Furthermore, Turkle (1995, 21) continues to say that "they insist that it demonstrates the truth of the adage that ninety percent of sex takes place in the mind".

Digital spaces were often imagined to be a kind of utopia, where people feel some freedom to choose who and what they want to be, without the negative connotations that are attached to various offline identities, and the intimate and/or sexual relationships that develop between players while online are consensual. Digital spaces, however, are not always safe places which I discuss further in the following section (and in Chapter 6).

**Violence, sexism and misogyny in digital spaces**

Evidence of hostile misogynist rhetoric is easily located on the internet (Jane 2014). As stated by Jane (2014, 558), "it is calculated to offend, it is often difficult and disturbing to read, and it falls well outside the norms of what is usually considered 'civil' academic discourse". Jane (2014, 558) shows that much of this hostile rhetoric (also referred to as 'e-bile') is directed at women in the form of rape and death threats from online users who "wish to register their disagreement with and/or disapproval of women". Consalvo notes:

Of course harassment of female players has been occurring for quite some time - perhaps the entire history of gaming - but it seems to have become more virulent and concentrated in the past couple of years ... Each event taken in isolation is troubling enough, but chaining them together into a timeline demonstrates how the individual links are not actually isolated incidents at all but illustrate a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position (Consalvo 2012, unpaginated).

Consalvo (2012) explains that gaming has always been a male dominated space and that the 'encroachment' of girls and women into gaming has not gone unnoticed. As such, academics are well positioned to aid in examining further "how and why some players are threatened by the changes to the game industry and gamer culture" (Consalvo 2012, unpaginated). Women critics (such as Anita Sarkeesian, who hosts an online blog called *Feminist Frequency*) are often targets of cyber-bullying. For example, since 2011 (after her critique of female representations in video games) Sarkeesian has been subjected to an on-going hate campaign where she is the recipient of racial abuse and multiple threats of rape and murder (which I discuss further in Chapter 6).

Online games are also shown to be a hostile environment for certain players (Gray 2012) and scholars have been concerned with the representational politics embedded within videogames (Cassell and Jenkins 2000; Fox and Tang 2013; Shaw and Warf 2009). Fox and Tang (2013, 5), for example, highlight how online games are influenced by a hypermasculine discourse which tends to alienate women and other minority players. They also state that "even when harassment is not taking place, sexist language and other actions reinforce masculine norms and other features that may create a hostile environment". Nakamura (2009) demonstrates in her study of race and gold farming in WoW, the racial identities of online gamers

are far from straight-forward and are shown to be complex and at times, paradoxical. For example, on the one hand, online worlds such as WoW are in many ways the realisation of utopian ideals, with players being able to choose and customise their avatar's appearance and act in ways that they could not in offline environments. On the other hand, real-world prejudices of racial hatred are very much present within online gaming spaces, which is evident via the racial profiling and derogatory comments that are made towards particular players, such as gold farmers, who are typically assumed to be Chinese. Nakamura (2009, 132) writes:

> Asian ''farmers'' or virtual capital laborers have a significant cultural and social impact on MMOs. Though not all farmers, or for-profit workers, are Asian by any means, the image of the farmer has come to include race as part of the package. This racialization of the player worker in online social spaces is actively constructed by WoW fans, who have produced an extensive body of writing and digital cinema which cybertype Asian farmers as unwanted, illegal, and anti-social workers.

Another example of unsafe digital space is provided by way of Turkle's (1995) discussion of virtual rape which occurred within the online space of LambdoMOO[16] in 1992, when a character calling himself Mr Bungle used a computer 'hacking' program to control the actions of two other players' avatars and forced them to perform violent sexual acts either with him, or on themselves. This event angered many players, who afterwards demanded that Mr Bungle be punished. All those who witnessed this cyber-crime understood that in reality this incident amounted to no more than an exchange of words and an infringement upon civility. For the two players, however, whose avatars were forced into these scenarios, the emotional impact was very real, with one woman (living in Seattle,

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[16] LambdoMOO (also known as MOO) emerged out of the concept of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) – virtual communities. MOO is a text based online community which was founded in the early 1990s. It is one of the oldest virtual communities and is still operating in 2015.

USA) confessing that she streamed with tears when she discussed her experience of the incident with a friend online. Violent discourse within online games is often evident when gamers with non-hetero identities disclose their sexuality (Shaw 2009, 2012a; Sunden 2009). Grosz (1995, 219) discusses how it is useful "to talk about queerness, or even gayness when theorizing sexed bodies and their sexual relations". In game studies the player or subject who is active and transgressive is often the point of focus. Typically, this is in relation to the game's dominant values and norms or to heteronormativity.

While this thesis examines elements of transgression, it also explores its limits. Hetero-sexuality is often related to in terms of 'naturalisation', which is similar to Butler's (1990) 'heterosexual matrix', and Rich's (1980) 'compulsory heterosexuality', where dominant discourse regulates and aligns bodies according to heteronormative standards. In this sense, queer bodies and sexualities are typically viewed as transgressions to the norm. Sunden (2009,3) argues that in WoW players are positioned in particular ways according to dominant discourses both in relation to game mechanics and game aesthetics, and also by wider game culture "in ways that plays with, for example, gender and sexuality in certain ways (and not others). The design of avatars – how they look, move, feel, fight, jump, speak, laugh, flirt, dance etc. – speaks volumes about social and cultural perceptions of sexed bodies". Sunden (2009, 3) continues:

> But equally important are the ways in which players are
> collectively imagining who 'the player' is, and how such fantasies
> are connected (or disconnected) with the politics of the interface ...
> this ideal or implied player is certainly socially and culturally
> informed, and as such housing expectations and preconceptions
> dominating the game industry and player cultures alike. For queer
> gamers, sexuality figures quite intimately as part of game culture
> in ways that suggests play at odds with the ideal player – *a player*
> *who is at least symbolically male and straight* ... As long as the fantasy

of 'the player' is intact, the game works smoothly ... Thus, another potentially transgressive, disobedient, unsettling figure is the non-straight player – male, female or in-between – who makes explicit how sexuality comes to matter in online game cultures.

Researchers such as Sunden (2009) and Pulos (2013) raise excellent points regarding the constraints placed on LGBTQ communities within online environments. Both also discuss the case of Andrews (which I refer to in Chapter 4) and the varying levels of violence, hate crimes, verbal harassment and intolerance (not only from other gamers but also from game administrators) which are directed at gamers who 'perform' in ways that do not conform to heteronormative and heterosexual norms.

**Summary**

The topic of love and romance, both online and offline, is a topic that has begun to receive some scholarly attention, particularly from psychologists and sociologists interested in exploring online intimacy (Baker 2002, 2005; Ben-Ze'ev 2004). It is a topic, however, that has largely been overlooked by geographers. As such, it seems that love continues to be perceived as a private affair, and perhaps a topic that is too 'close' and personal for 'appropriate' academic enquiry. The literature that is currently available provides a closer examination of online romances, yet much of it lacks the 'critical edge' that feminist and queer geographers in particular, are renowned for. Therefore, despite geography's growing interest in emotion and affect both online and offline, the topic of love in-general has remained under-examined. Also, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no other academic enquiries from feminist geographers concerning love in online games. It is in this sense that this study will initiate new lines of feminist geographical enquiry. Other areas of theoretical discussion highlighted in this chapter also originate from developing fields of study, such as cyber-queer, violence, sexism and misogyny in online games.

In this chapter, I have argued that online space is increasingly becoming known as a 'new' and exciting space for relationship development. Over the past decade, there has been a steady rise in the number of people who choose to seek out and engage in elements of love and romance via the internet. Not only are people seeking out these relationships but (largely due to advancements in technology and computer graphic simulations) they are now able to do so in a number of different digital environments and/or communities, via multiple forms of identity and gender representations. Dominant discourses in online games concerning sexuality often attempt to silence and marginalise LGBTQ voices. People conform to (as well as subvert, resist and challenge) socio-cultural expectations of gender performativity within different spaces and places. As argued by Del Casino (2009, 160), "there is a need to trace how resistance *and* domination operate in certain spaces, as various social groups and peoples struggle to define alternative identities and subjectivities" (emphasis in original). Therefore, in relation to the spaces of online role-playing games, it is important to strive for a contextualised understanding which advances our knowledge of relationships within these environments. Also, due to the increasing number of people participating in online games, it is crucial that there is a continued effort to build an awareness of how people interpret and negotiate their positions in relation to gender, sexuality, social values and norms as they shift between real and digital environments. In the following chapter, I explain the methodological processes used to conduct this research.

## CHAPTER 3: Methodology

> It should be obvious that contemporary cultural geographers are acutely conscious that their task is not a simple matter of studying an out-there reality. The way one goes about defining the area of study, the ideological position one operates from, the way one relates to the subject matter, all contribute not just to one's style of working and representation, but also to the creation of a new cultural product, however small (Shurmer-Smith 2002, 95).

The above quote by Shurmer-Smith (2002) outlines some of the reasons why using a 'recipe book' approach to methods is not a good idea, and instead speaks to the importance of doing research in a way which encourages diversity within methodology. In a similar vein, this research has taken into consideration a number of qualitative approaches informed by feminist and cultural studies theories (as well as my own online gaming experiences) in order to gain a deeper insight into the worlds and experiences of online gamers.

Over the course of this study I have spent more than five years gaming in WoW and am well versed with the online culture of this particular game. Therefore, the feminist methodological practices utilised for this research promote an awareness of research relationships and power relations. The idea that knowledge is neutral or objective is rejected, instead feminist methodologies acknowledge the complex web of elements, such as embodiment and emotion (each an important element in this study) that are everyday constituents of knowledge production. Feminist research aids in highlighting marginalised positions and experiences, while also addressing the power relations at play, particularly between researchers and their participants. Moss points out that early methodological works have been strongly influenced by feminist work carried out in the 1980s, and "the crux of these concepts remained the same – method has to do with *doing* research, methodology had to do with *approaching* research and epistemology had to do with *knowledge associated with doing and approaching research*" (2002, 2, emphasis in original). As a

result, the ways in which research is conducted varies and is reflexive of broader disciplinary approaches to knowledge production. For example, feminist geographers focus on elements of spatialisation, in order to bring a more contextualised understanding of place in relation to topics such as gender, age and ethnicity (Moss 2002). . Moss (2002, 3) goes on to state:

> Being able to work through these types of interests has had an impact on the way feminists approach research within geography … The maturity of the methodological arguments developed by so many feminists within the past several years makes feminist geography a rich field from which to draw out specific research practices. Being a feminist matters when taking on research in geography in that a feminist politics – whether it be based on pro-woman, anti-oppression, or based on social justice – influences all aspects of the research process.

Furthermore, Moss (2002, 3) argues that thinking about feminist research often sharpens approaches to projects and where having an "understanding of power and knowledge brings into focus the varied contexts within which research takes place". As such, feminist research is known for its ability to empower and emancipate the communities that it serves (Alice 1999; Holloway 1997; Jones *et al.* 1997). Overall, feminist research has become generally understood as encompassing a variety of feminist approaches, and at times with competing and/or conflicting debates (Butler 1999; Holloway 1997).

In this chapter I discuss the methods used in this research beginning with the procedures used to recruit 57 participants, which vary, from 'snowballing', to posting advertisements online in game forums (as the latter method was carried out in two separate stages) and other social media network sites. Second, I outline how semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out, followed by a discussion concerning the use of online gaming forums and the posting of an

online questionnaire link. In this research, I received 12 follow-up questionnaires and multiple screenshots (photos) from several participants. I then go on to discuss the ways in which I have incorporated autoethnography as a data gathering method, in order to reflect on my own experiences of gaming within an online environment and culture. Here I analyse my own position in this research, including my participation in online games. Conducting research in online spaces is becoming common amongst social scientists, however in terms of research ethics, criteria continue to develop. I provide an overview of internet gaming forums, as they make up one part of the information gathering process, which was unexpected, yet fortuitous. This particular process also prompted me to think carefully about my positionality within the research and I discuss aspects of this in relation to becoming an active participant within these online forums.

**Participant recruitment and data collection methods**

The 57 participants[17] were recruited using several methods, including 'snowballing' via word-of-mouth, handing out flyers to local game retailers who specialised in games, and sending out e-mail flyers across academic networks and listservs. Multiple postings were also placed within online gaming forums, as well as across other online social media networks, such as Facebook. Online research methods (which are discussed later in this chapter) proved to be the most effective, whereas, the snowballing technique was less successful, attracting five recruits who participated in face-to-face interviews. This study also adopted various data collection methods, which I discuss in the following sub-sections.

*Interviews*

Five people participated in face-to-face interviews, and one interview was with a married couple (making a total of four interviews). Each interview lasted approximately 2.5 – 3 hours. Three of the interviews were conducted at participants' homes, and the fourth interview took place in the participant's office

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[17] All participants have been given pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity.

at work during lunch time. Minicheiello and Kottler (2010) note that to understand the power of conversation is to elicit rich data, and when implemented as part of a semi-structured interview, can produce extremely rich data. *W*hile only five participants were recruited with the 'snowball' method, their interview material certainly produced a wealth of in-depth information (Flowerdew and Martin 2005; Longhurst 2003; Minichiello and Kottler 2010).

Each interview began with an overview of the information sheet, which set out the parameters, guidelines and purpose of the research (see Appendix 1). This was followed by a brief profile questionnaire (see Appendix 2) which not only provided an outline of participants' backgrounds but it also helped to establish rapport with each interviewee before I embarked on more in-depth questions. Of the four face-to-face interviews, one was with a couple – Matt and Regina who lived in Auckland, NZ. The interview was held at their home, and I drove from Hamilton to Auckland (a two-hour drive) in order to meet them and talk with them about their experiences of online gaming and how they came to meet each other in a game where, at that time, there were over 11 million subscribers.

The interview with Matt and Regina was significant because it was my first experience with interviewing a couple. During our interview it was apparent that some of Matt's and Regina's responses to questions were part of a collaborative dialogue. This does not necessarily mean that it prompted their answers to be any more or less accurate (Zipp and Toth 2002). Rather, their responses evolved out of a collaborative interaction. For example, Valentine (1999, 68) states:

> One strength of joint interviewing is that a process of negotiation and mediation takes place between couples and the production of a single collaborative account for the interviewer, which can provide material or insights into the dynamics of the household that would be difficult to identify in a one-to-one interview.

Valentine's (1999) statement proved to be correct, as during the course of the interview, both Matt and Regina often turned to one another, sometimes to acknowledge, clarify, and even dispute each other's statements. Overall, this added to the conversation and worked to "encourage spontaneous further discussion, providing richer, more detailed validated accounts than those generated by interviews with individuals" (Valentine 1999, 68). While interviews provided 'rich' and valuable data, the majority of participants were recruited via online forums, which I discuss in the following section.

### *Internet forums and online questionnaires*

Gibbons and Nuttall (2012, 1228) highlight that there are now over 1.5 billion people using the internet and this number is rapidly increasing, and as such "the Internet's value for conducting research is ever more apparent." Although this number is not completely representative of a country's population, it does, nonetheless represent how accessible and wide reaching the internet is when seeking research participants. Online social networks were utilised as a potential place to attract participants, with email requests being sent to online forum administrators which contained a brief explanation regarding the purpose of the research, as well as an embedded link to the online questionnaire that forum visitors would be invited to participate in (see Appendix 3). After approval was granted, an invitation to participate in this research was posted in several gaming forum websites, and each post was used as a platform to provide more information about the study by outlining its purpose and affiliation with the University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand (see Madge *et al.* 2004 on the internet as a medium for research).

Overall, two attempts at online recruitment occurred. The first attempt saw information about this research posted onto two online forums (MMOsite.com and GamePlanet.co.nz). The first two postings occurred in December 2010. They were short-lived (lasting approximately 1-2 weeks) and did not attract the desired number of participants, with only 22 survey hits recorded. Of these 22 responses,

only six completed the online questionnaire. It is important to note, however, that the lack of response was perhaps due to two things; the first being the time of the year, as NZ's summer holiday period was fast approaching; the second being my own inexperience with participating in online discussion forums (which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter under the sub-heading "Positionality, personality and autoethnography online"). While the first attempt cannot be considered a huge success, it was nevertheless, an excellent learning experience. The second attempt at recruiting via online gaming forums was much more successful, resulting in 130 survey hits,[18] with participants being recruited from many different countries (see Table 1). Of this total, 46 participants completed an online questionnaire. The combined total of completed online questionnaires came to 52, with 12 of these opting to participate in a follow-up questionnaire. Of the 57 participants, 23 (41%) are women gamers (see Table 1).

Information highlighting this research was posted on several website pages, including, MMO Couples (Wordpress.com), MMO Couples (Facebook page). These two websites presented an excellent opportunity to circulate information about the research to an online audience of potential participants who 'fit' the research criteria. For example, the introductory advertisement for MMO Couples states:

> **WELCOME TO MMO COUPLES**
> Everyone who is familiar with MMOG's (massive multiplayer online games), knows the stories of people who are so addicted to playing these games that it costs them their real life friendships and relationships. There are also stories though of people who meet in a MMOG and fall in love, like my boyfriend and I. '*MMO couples*' is a tribute to our lovestory, but also an invitation to share

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[18] This total represents the overall number of hits, including the questionnaires that were not completed.

your story and experiences with others" (Retrieved 12 June 2011,
http://mmocouples.blogspot.co.nz/).

Other online gaming forums included GamePlanet.co.nz, AlakaZAM.com, and
DSLreports.com, and MMO-Champion.com. Each of the website forums had
differing policies regarding the posting of research, and each was managed by one
or more administrators. In order to post my research and questionnaire link in an
online forum it was necessary for me to first contact the web administrators. This
proved quite difficult. For whatever reasons, forum administrators of these
websites were typically slow to respond to my email, therefore, I often sent two or
more email requests before receiving a reply. In several instances, it was necessary
to classify some forum administrators as 'unresponsive' if they failed to reply after
three attempts to contact them.

Requests to post on several other sites were submitted but were declined. For
example, MMOsite.com accepted my first request but chose to decline my second
request to repeat my post within their forum, stating that repeat posting went
against their forum policies. Also, for other online gaming forums, such as
Blizzard.com, it is standard practice to decline all requests which involve the
posting of research.

**Table 1.1: Overview of participants**

| Gender | Age | Country | Occupation | Total No. Of relationships | Met Offline | Planning to Meet | Partner details | How they Met |
|--------|-----|---------|------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| M | 32 | New Zealand (NZ) | Information technology | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/36/NZ | Guild |
| M | 26 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/23/AUS | Guild |
| M | 19 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/25/USA | Guild |
| M | 24 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/AUS | Guild |
| M | 23 | NZ | Support desk | 3 | No | Yes but did not | Unknown | Guild |
| M | 25 | NZ | Unknown | 2 | 1st yes 2nd no | N/A | Both in AUS | Playing WoW |
| M | 27 | NZ | Information technology | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/32/NZ | Guild |
| M | 28 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/NZ | Guild |
| M | 24 | NZ | Tradesperson | 2 | No | No | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 28 | NZ | Information technology | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/NZ | Playing WoW |
| M | 26 | NZ | ISP coordinator | 2 | Yes | N/A | F/AUS | Guild |
| M | 31 | NZ | Analyst prog | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/NZ | Offline |

| Gender | Age | Country | Occupation | Total No. Of relationships | Met Offline | Planning to Meet | Partner details | How they Met |
|--------|-----|---------|-----------|---------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| M | 22 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/NZ | Game forum |
| M | 23 | NZ | Concrete worker | 1 | No | Unknown | F/AUS | Guild |
| M | 38 | NZ | Lab tech | 1 | No | Yes | F/USA | Playing WoW |
| M | 22 | NZ | Analyst prog | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/Jakarta | Thru a friend playing WoW |
| M | 24 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/Philippines | Playing WoW |
| M | 36 | Greece | Consultant | 1 | Unknown | N/A | Unknown | Unknown |
| M | 22 | Australia (AUS) | Draftsperson | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/AUS | Guild |
| M | 33 | USA | Real estate | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 26 | USA | Dentist | 1 | No | Unknown | F | Guild |
| M | 51 | USA | Manager | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/Georgia | Playing WoW |
| M | 29 | USA | Miltary | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/USA | Offline |
| M | 24 | USA | Engineer | 1 | No | Yes | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 31 | USA | Microbiologist | 1 | No | Yes | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 41 | USA | Purchasing | 3 | Yes | N/A | F/Canada | Playing WoW |

| Gender | Age | Country | Occupation | Total No. Of relationships | Met Offline | Planning to Meet | Partner details | How they Met |
|--------|-----|---------|------------|---------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| M | 34 | UK | Transport planner | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/UK | Guild |
| M | 23 | UK | Registrar | 1 | No | Yes | F/UK | Guild |
| M | 24 | Canada | Sales | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/Canada | Guild |
| M | 39 | USA | Culinary arts | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 44 | USA | Information technology | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 29 | USA | Electrician | 1 | No | No | F/USA | Playing WoW |
| M | 26 | USA | Info resource consultant | 1 | No | No | F/USA | Playing WoW |
| M | 21 | NZ | Information technology | 3 | No | No | F/USA | Guild |
| M | 28 | USA | Consultant | 1 | Yes | N/A | F/USA | Dating website |
| F | 35 | NZ | Receptionist | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/25/NZ | Guild |
| F | 42 | NZ | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/34/NZ | Guild |

| Gender | Age | Country | Occupation | Total No. Of relationships | Met Offline | Planning to Meet | Partner details | How they Met |
|--------|-----|---------|------------|---------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| F | 18 | AUS | Student | 1 | No | Yes | M/22/USA | Guild |
| F | 18 | USA | Student | 2 | 1st no 2nd no | 1st N/A 2nd yes | 1ST M/19/USA 2ND M/19/USA | Both playing WoW |
| F | 26 | USA | Accountant | 2 | Yes | N/A | M | Guild |
| F | 32 | Canada | Accountant | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/17/ENG | Playing WoW |
| F | 31 | NZ | Uni lecturer | 1 | No | N/A | M/41/USA | Guild |
| F | 31 | NZ | Customer serv | 2 | 1st no 2nd yes | N/A | 1ST M/26/USA 2ND M/29/NZ | 1st guild 2nd offline |
| F | 37 | USA | Business owner | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/26/NZ | Guild |
| F | 32 | NZ | Website design | 2 | 1st no 2nd yes | N/A | 1ST M/AUS 2ND M/27/NZ | 1st guild 2nd guild |
| F | 35 | Netherlands | Social worker | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/Vienna | Playing WoW |
| F | 28 | UK | Sales advisor | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/UK | Guild |
| F | 27 | Netherlands | Housewife | 5+ | Yes | N/A | M/Netherlands | Guild |
| F | 34 | NZ | Data officer | 1 | No | No | M/NZ | Guild |

| Gender | Age | Country | Occupation | Total No. Of relationships | Met Offline | Planning to Meet | Partner details | How they Met |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| F | 28 | USA | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/Oklahoma | Unknown |
| F | 25 | Philippines | Pro gamer | 2 | Yes | N/A | M/NZ | Offline |
| F | 25 | Philippines | Customer serv | 3 | No | No | M/AUS | Guild |
| F | 25 | USA | Server | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/USA | Online forum |
| F | 22 | USA | Student | 1 | Unknown | N/A | Unknown | In another online game |
| F | 45 | UK | Caterer | 1 | No | Yes | M/UK | Guild |
| F | 46 | UK | Vet receptionist | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/USA | Guild |
| F | 19 | USA | Student | 1 | Yes | N/A | M/USA | Playing WoW |

Initially it took three attempts to contact Blizzard.com before they replied to my request, where they simply stated: "Hello, survey related posts are not allowed on the forums – The World of Warcraft Community Team" (Blizzard.com, forum admin, email correspondence 2010). Elitistjerks.com was another forum that refused all applications, however, they were more forthcoming in their response to my request, stating:

> This sounds like a fine project, however, Elitist Jerks receives approximately one or two requests a week for permission to post regarding matters such as this. Because we simply can't accommodate every request, we've made the decision to deny all requests of this manner (Elistist Jerks, forum admin, email correspondence 2011).

After perusing several gaming forum websites, it became evident that many of the posts proposing 'research' were being submitted by forum members interested in conducting informal research (and not regulated by academic/organisational guidelines). Yet some forums do take the time to consider the merits of each individual application. A forum administrator for Alakazam.com, for example, accepted my request to post, commenting: "Sure, that one looks good. Not something we've seen before, and proper credentials" (Alakazam.com, forum admin, email correspondence 2011).

The research information posted on each of the websites invited readers to click on an embedded link that redirected each participant to an online questionnaire, which was located at surveymonkey.com. The basic application of Survey Monkey is a free web-based tool that allows the creation of an online survey or questionnaire. Users can pay to upgrade their account to 'premium' level, which entitles the user to more options for questionnaire design, collection and analysis. This research utilised Survey Monkey primarily as a free service (with the exception of two months paid subscription), as it offered a wide range of attractive

and user-friendly questionnaire design options, as well as providing a straight-forward system of collecting and analysing results. These benefits have also been noted by Madge *et al.* (2004, unpaginated):

> Additionally, web-based surveys provide a far superior questionnaire interface to e-mail surveys and it is possible to make them more user-friendly and attractive, thus encouraging higher response rates. The web-based survey can also be included on a dedicated website which can be used as a platform to provide more information about the project, the researchers and the affiliated institution.

Gibbons and Nuttall (2012, 1230) note: "online discussion forums/message board communities have received an increasing amount of academic attention." As such, the ethics of conducting research within these communities has been examined and discussed at length. They argue, however, that there is a notable absence of discussion relating to the use of online forum community boards to disseminate e-questionnaires.[19] Gibbons and Nuttall (2012, 1237) add:

> The nature of online forum discussions means that e-surveys are not completed by respondents in complete isolation from one another. Forum threads allow potential respondents to openly discuss the research project and specific questions within the survey itself. We deliberately use the term 'potential' respondents, rather than 'actual', as one of the distinct advantages of disseminating e-surveys via discussion boards is that they also allow the researcher to engage with those who chose not to complete the survey. The discussion thread allowed members of

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[19] Gibbons and Nuttall (2012) discuss the use of online forums to disseminate information about research, I also did this. Our methods are similar, yet, while their research revolves around the use of e-surveys, my own utilises online questionnaires.

the online community in question to voice their opinion on the topic, give feedback on the research project and indicate potential reasons as to why they were unwilling to be fully fledged participants.

This was also my experience, as all of the online forums utilised for advertising this research received varying degrees of discussion from forum users commenting on the research topic. All of the data provided by participants was collected via Survey Monkey and I was able to collect up to 100 responses, at which point, only a paid membership will allow the researcher to continue collecting. Therefore, due to an increasing number of responses, two months membership subscription was paid for during the course of this research. Many responses recorded in Survey Monkey came from people who had accessed the link but chose not to participate in the questionnaire. This resulted in the collection of empty questionnaires. Overall, Survey Monkey recorded 130 'hits'. Out of these, 46 were completed questionnaires, leaving a total of 84 questionnaires that were incomplete and unusable. A record was kept of the overall number of responses for data collection purposes. This also made it possible to minimise the costs for using the Survey Monkey service, as many of the empty questionnaires were deleted in order to continue the collection of questionnaires free of charge.

Utilising both online gaming forums and surveymonkey.com was extremely beneficial for recruiting participants, collecting research data and analysing information. These particular avenues for gathering data proved to be highly effective for several reasons. First, they enabled this research to reach a wider, more geographically dispersed population (Madge *et al.* 2004). Second, given the scope of this research it was somewhat difficult to reach and recruit participants in conventional ways, therefore suitable methods were used which were effective in reaching potential participants who fit the research criterion. Third, research costs were reduced and the information gained from the completed questionnaires arrived in a format which was more readily available for analysis (Denscombe

2010). Fourth, it allowed the gathering of data from a much larger group of participants, compared to in-depth semi-structured interviews (Johnston 2003). Finally, not only was adopting online research methods appropriate for contacting online communities, it was also highly effective for exploring topics which are potentially sensitive and/or embarrassing and where anonymity works as an advantage for the people participating (Madge *et al.* 2004). Each participant who took part in this questionnaire was asked to provide their e-mail address if they were interested in participating in a follow-up questionnaire (see discussion in the following section).

Earlier in this section, I mentioned that there had been two attempts at posting my research within online game forums. What I neglected to mention, however, was that during my first attempt I was somewhat reserved with my online replies to people who were asking questions within the forum. This 'reservedness' was due to my lack of experience within online forums. Also, I was not prepared for the degree of flirtatiousness that accompanied many of these messages. In hindsight, I realise that my reserved behaviour during this time was a result of my going through a process of learning in relation to becoming accustomed to the nature of forum discourse. I felt conflicted between trying to maintain a professional persona, as well as trying to come across as open and carefree. Suffice to say, I struggled and my first attempt at online forum 'banter' was short lived but I learnt from the experience.

Each gaming forum is governed by one or more moderator. Each forum has multiple topics and discussion threads. Within each of these threads, a certain tone is established. For example, during my ongoing forays into forum discussions I came across many thought-provoking and intellectual conversation threads, however, I also came across others holding conversations that were aggressive and unpleasant. In instances such as these the moderators typically step-in and take control by performing actions such as deleting comments or banning users. Being aware of all of the negative outcomes associated with forum posting did not make

me feel any more at ease when I decided to begin my second attempt at posting my research within gaming forums. If anything, I was more anxious than the first time because I knew that this time I needed to be successful.

Fortunately, however, my second attempt at posting in gaming forums was much more successful and the forum thread conversations were much more jovial and relaxed. I chose to make a conscious effort to be more open and less serious in my forum replies. For example, one person sent a request twice asking me to post a link to my WoW character armoury. In this instance I hesitated to carry out this request, however, the second request was accompanied with a statement saying that they would not take the survey unless I did this. Given my new found attitude to be more open I decided to comply. I replied to the post and inserted an online link to my main WoW character, saying:

> Okay, here's my armory link:
>
> I welcome any constructive feedback but please be gentle with any criticism, as I've only been playing for about a year and don't pretend to know everything there is to know about the game.
>
> Also, I recently switched from Prot to DPS and I'm still working on her ilvl (currently 356). This is my main but she hasn't had a lot of game time just lately because I've been busy levelling a Resto shaman for guild dungeon runs.

In truth, I was hesitant in carrying out this request because it felt as if I was exposing my online self, and as the above quote shows, I was reluctant to be critiqued because often in the world of gamers, criticism received from other gamers is brutal and unpleasant. As I soon found out, however, not one person made negative comments about me or my WoW avatar. Cupples (2003, 382) argues that "if sexuality both produces space and permeates social life, then the fieldwork experience is no different". Indeed, my sexuality as a researcher was brought to

the fore in several forum conversations, and it was something that I had to quickly learn to navigate my way through without ostracising potential participants. For example, another participant within the same forum suggested that I have a picnic with him in-game and asked which server I played on. I replied:

> Lol [laugh out loud], first of all, I play on Khaz'goroth, and second, thanks for the offer but I'm way too busy for picnics! Unless of course, you mean a picnic research interview 😜.

> Forum user: Damn, I'm on Cael, but am from Hamilton though. Perhaps a real picnic research interview?

After consulting with one of my supervisors, we agreed that it would be good to follow-up with this and see if it would lead to an actual interview but chose to deliberately leave out the word 'picnic' from my reply. I responded with:

> So you're from Tron [colloquial name for Hamilton], excellent! I would be happy to meet up for a research interview - we could do this over coffee in the city. PM [private message] me if you're interested and we'll sort out a day and time to meet up.

There was no response publicly or privately from this person to my post. Much to my amusement, however, another forum user within the same thread later posted the following comment: "'research interview' wink wink nudge nudge". Also, in response to the same dialogue, yet another forum user posted: "I'd answer but I've never had any kind of relationships in wow or anywhere online ... I'm on khaz though, want a picnic? 😄"

In other forums I received similar questions and comments such as: "Are you personally interested in a relationship with one of our users?" And; "Sorry I am married but if you are really hot we can talk, pic pls [picture please]." Cupples

(2003, 383) suggests that sexuality is "to a large extent about interaction with others. Being constructed as an object of desire or being sexually attracted to members of a researched community make us aware of how identity is constructed for us and that there are multifaceted meanings to gender". During these types of conversations I was aware that these forum users were constructing me as a 'hot girl-gamer'[20], and I was uncomfortable with this flirtatious banter. I was concerned that this would have a negative effect on the research, yet the overall outcome has been beneficial and these interactions have proven to be useful sources of data.

*Follow-up email questionnaires*

Johnston (2003, 122) notes that "the use of questionnaires is not common in cultural geography for a number of reasons" – the most obvious being that they are typically associated with statistical or quantitative research which "address issues of reliability (they wish to be able to replicate the results) and validity (the questionnaire must measure what it intended to)" (Johnston 2003, 127). While this research is informed by multiple methods, online questionnaires make up a significant portion of the data collected. The choice to adopt questionnaires as a main method of data collection (for both the online questionnaire and the follow-up email questionnaire) was not driven by a need to incorporate traditional quantitative ideals.[21] Rather, this particular method proved to be the most effective for data collection for following reasons. First, it was an appropriate way for the participants involved in this study to communicate their experiences (as explained in the following paragraph), and second, it provided an effective way to contact participants who would otherwise remain out of reach.

All 12 follow-up questionnaires (see Appendix 4) were completed via e-mail contact. Not one participant who agreed to do the follow-up email questionnaire

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[20] Women who game are often flirted with and a common assumption is made that these women are attractive. I discuss gaming discourse in relation to gender in more detail in Chapter 6.
[21] This research is based mainly within the paradigm of qualitative study, however, the use of questionnaires aided in providing some statistical information which benefitted the overall research findings.

accepted my offer to answer the research questions using another method, such as by telephone, face-to-face (if it did not involve travel overseas), or via an online audio connection (such as Skype or Ventrilo). Hine (2005, 1) states that "mediated interactions have come to the fore as key ways in which social practices are defined and experienced", and goes on to highlight the complexities surrounding the uses of research methods in an online arena. Hine (2005, 1) explains that there is "considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technology mediated interactions". While this is certainly true and these methods continue to develop, it is also important to acknowledge that in a study, such as this (where the aim is to promote dialogue with people involved in online games, for the purpose of talking about personal and intimate experiences), it is crucial to connect with participants on a level that is convenient and comfortable for them. Due to the amount of data collected and participants' preference to provide data via online and email questionnaires (rather than Skype or a face-to-face interview setting), it is safe to assume that they are indeed, very comfortable using technology as a primary interface for communication.

The follow-up e-mail questionnaires (see Appendix 4) listed 11 questions and asked for more in-depth information from participants, such as the ways in which they negotiate their online and offline relationships, how they relate to their gaming avatars or virtual self, and their views about using an avatar of the opposite sex while gaming. Overall, a total of 31 participants opted to leave their email address and receive a copy of the follow-up questionnaire. All 31 were sent a copy of the follow-up email questionnaire and 12 of these were completed and returned.

*Screenshot images*
All participants involved in this study were asked if they would like to provide computer screenshot pictures of their avatar, either with or without their online romantic partner. From a total of 57 participants, seven chose to provide screenshot

images of their avatars in-game. Also, several of my own screenshot images were captured during ethnographic fieldwork. Consequently, this research draws on various works relating to visual methodologies, including Becker (2002); Carr *et al.* (2006); Crang (1997, 2003); Latham (2003); Rose (2001, 2007, 2008); and, Spencer (2011). Spencer (2011, 1) contends that there are two compelling reasons for using visual methods in research. First, the visual is central to the human condition and to expressions which "pre-date language, affecting our emotions, identities, memories and aspirations in a most profound way". Second, Spencer (2009) goes on to say that we are visual beings living in a world that consists of a visual array of meanings, and despite this, the visual has been undervalued in social science research. The screenshots collected include an array of images, from love letters, to avatar couples in romantic settings (such as picnics and wedding ceremonies). These images provided numerous opportunities to explore the ways in which various elements (such as expressions of identity, relationships, and social context) are recognised within a digital world.

Rose's (2001) ideas regarding critical visual methodologies are utilised as they highlight the ways in which the visual can add to the diversity and depth of discourse analysis. Rose (2001, 136) states that "the diversity of forms through which a discourse can be articulated means that intertextuality is important to understanding discourse". In short, Rose is referring to how the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and text. In this sense, critical visual methodologies are of benefit to this research, as they offer a more in-depth and holistic way of "understanding symbolic qualities of text, [and] the way that elements of the text always refer to the wider cultural context of which they are a part" (Rose 2001, 55). Rose (2007) highlights how, for the most part, geographers are often seen to be more interested in photographs for their material representations of place, which is particularly useful for "capturing the 'texture' of places", as well as the embodied and 'fleshy' elements of everyday life (Rose 2007, 247). She (2008, 154) also argues that "photographs are intimately involved in

social power relations", and when used in a particular way, can illuminate the embodied nature of geography. It is in line with these works, that I use the screenshot photographs to examine the ways in which intimate relationships are constituted within digital worlds.

*Ethnography/autoethnography*

As discussed by Butz (2010) autoethnography continues to be a developing methodology. Butz (2010, 139) explains that "autoethnography is not a methodology, nor even a set of methods united by a focus on self-representation. Rather, it is an epistemological orientation to the relationships among experience, knowledge, and representation that has a variety of methodological implications". This quote is particularly relevant, as it demonstrates a need for the further development of an autoethnographic epistemological orientation. Additionally, autoethnography can be a powerful tool and over the past decade it has been used to highlight the ways in which particular marginalised identities negotiate spaces of power and control (Brown 2012b). The utilisation of an autoethnographic sensibility has been instrumental in helping to inform my own work on gender, sexuality and relationships in online games. Not only does it offer an in-depth perspective from which to examine particular phenomena (often not recognised in geography) but it also serves as a form of self-narrative (and reflection of positionality that would otherwise be overlooked), and which works to place the 'self' within the social context (Ali 2014).

Besio (2005, 320) contends that "not only do researchers need to find ways to practice research, we must also find ways of writing it up, locating ourselves within the text without reproducing essentializing epistemologies". In this thesis, I draw on my own experiences of gaming and use autoethnography as a qualitative research method. Autoethnography differs from ethnography, in that, it acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity rather than limiting it, and is typically described as a form of self-reflection and writing which explores the researcher's

personal experience and connects this to the wider cultural and social meanings of place. Autoethnography aims to "understand something - a community, event or way of life - from the inside, with a particular focus on 'every day, lived experiences'" (Cook 2005a, 167). It also uses qualitative methods in order for the researcher to understand and record both their own experiences, as well as their participants within a shared environment. This study is founded on qualitative methodologies and as such, it opposes the notion of objectivity, where the researcher is viewed as a detached and impartial 'scientist' seeking 'truth': instead, it openly acknowledges the embodied nature of fieldwork and the subjectivity of the researcher. Ellis *et al.* (2011, 1) explain:

> Autoethnography is an approach ... that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product (emphasis in original).

Adopting autoethnography as a method also allows for a fuller realisation of reflexivity[22] within research practice, and consequently, this provides an excellent opportunity for the researcher to become more aware of their role and relationship to the research. Furthermore, in order to utilise an (auto)ethnographic approach I chose to adopt the following set of core values (as described by Jones and Watt 2010), which provide a guiding ethos in relation to 'ethnographic sensibility'.

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[22] 'Reflexivity' refers to a process of reflection about who we are, what we know, and how we come to know it (Aitken and Valentine 2006, 341).

These core values include 'participation', which is participant observation and typically understood to be the central method. As Jones and Watt's (2010) point out, however, not all research field settings allow researchers to fully participate, and this is an important factor to consider when conducting fieldwork in digital environments. While the researcher is not physically present, they are committed to participating on a level that is engaging and emotional. Therefore, the ways in which researchers go about establishing a virtual presence is crucial to success. 'Immersion' involves participating within a cultural setting to the extent where the researcher 'learns the language' both literally and metaphorically. 'Reflection, reflexivity and representation' requires the researcher to constantly reflect upon their work. Reflexivity is more than simple reflection, as it draws upon ethical, political and theoretical positionings. 'Thick description' is the undertaking of an ethnographic form of data collection that involves recording everything in a descriptive manner with as much detail and contextualisation as possible. "If done well, it not only recreates the field setting as accurately as possible but also affords sufficient context to allow 'understanding', in a phenomenological sense" (Jones and Watt 2010, 8). 'An active, participative ethics' is sought and the majority of researchers conducting ethnographic studies do so overtly. Even when researching the field in a covert manner, there is a code of ethics that is always maintained. 'Empowerment' aims to empower research participants and is a common goal in most qualitative research, often deemed crucial to the overall success of the study. These principles of ethnographic research seem compatible with principles often adopted in feminist research as both are sensitive to issues of power within the research. 'Understanding' is crucial and all ethnographic researchers seek to understand the social world they are examining.

Theorists such as Geertz (1984) contend that researchers can never see the world as 'natives', however, I approach this research with an emic[23] perspective, as I have

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[23] To conduct research with an emic perspective means "relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied" (Merriam-Webster 2015, unpaginated).

been a gamer for a longer period than I have been a researcher. Therefore, I am aware of acculturation processes and have remained highly self-reflexive throughout this research in order to maintain a critical focus. In studies such as this, Fine (1994) states that we, as researchers "walk the margins" separating us from those we are studying, and where the "native researcher" is the margin. With this in mind, I deliberately chose to not begin playing WoW until my project was approved by the ethics committee that governs University of Waikato research. When I began this project, I knew very little about WoW and had to learn the game and its cultural norms as a new player or 'newbie' as they are often described by more accomplished players. It has been almost five years since then and I am now very well versed in WoW. As such, Jones and Watt's (2010) comments have become relevant, as I now position myself as an 'insider' in the research.

**Data analysis and presentation of findings**

The forms of analyses utilised in this thesis stem from a poststructural feminist approach that aids in developing an in-depth understanding of particular texts within the cultural context in which they are embedded. As such, this research needs to be understood through the discursive contexts of gaming cultures, and where texts can be understood as being "constitutive of larger, more open-ended structures that are often termed discourses. They can be thought of as frameworks for understanding and communicating" (Hannam 2002, 194). Therefore, discourses can be powerful as they are capable of influencing and shaping specific institutions (Foucault 1977). In order to analyse the data collected for this research, each of the data sets (including face-to-face interviews, online forum discussions, online questionnaires, follow-up emails and screenshot images) underwent a series of thematic analysis. For example, in the case of face-to-face interviews, they were audio recorded and transcribed (verbatim) soon after, which enabled a better recollection of dialogue and situational information, as well as emotions. At this point, the initial phase of thematic analysis (as outlined by Clarke and Braun 2014) and all relevant notes and categorising of themes began and were noted on the completed transcripts, and then printed.

Clarke and Braun's guide to thematic analysis involves a six phase process. In brief, the first phase involves the researcher becoming familiarised with the data, while the second involves a systematic coding of the data. These codes can evolve across throughout the process but "should capture features of the data that are potentially relevant to the research question" (Clarke and Braun 2014, 1950). The third phase establishes "candidate themes" and if any data are similar or overlap. If this occurs, codes are clustered together to form larger, more complex themes with the relationships between potential themes also being noted. Phase four involves a review of the candidate themes, where the themes and the coded data are reviewed to check that they are a good 'fit' at the micro level coded data, and again at the macro level of the full data set. Phase five involves the writing of theme definitions, which "tell the story of each theme, its central concept, scope and boundaries (*ibid*.). Finally, the sixth phase involves "writing up", yet as Clarke and Braun (2014, 1950) note, "there is no clear separation between analysis and writing. In practice, writing up involves assembling, editing, and (new) writing and further analysis, organisation, and reorganization of the themes and relevant selected data extracts ... [which] should provide clear and compelling evidence to support analytic claims".

In conjunction with Clarke and Braun's (2014) thematic analysis guide, McDowell's 'listening guide' was also utilised. As described by McDowell (1997, 394), this is an analytical method that relies on four stages of listening. The first stage involves *listening for the plot*: "what happens, how the event unfolds, and how the narrator is situated in the plot." This first stage is particularly suited for research that includes an autoethnographical pursuit, as it requires the researcher to also reflect on themselves as interviewers, including:

> How we are located in a privileged position, interpreting the life of another person, and the affects the interaction has on our interpretations. We need to be aware here of the power relations

involved here and of our own feelings. In what ways do we identify with the 'respondent'? Are we puzzled? Have we had similar experiences? If we write out our own reactions it helps us to consider how these feelings influence our interpretation of the interview (McDowell 1997, 394).

The second stage involves *listening for the 'self'*, with emphasis placed on the voice of the other. This ensures that as interviewers "we allow our 'subjects' to speak for themselves before we speak for them". These first two stages are referred to as a relational method, where the research is seen as a collaborative project between the researcher and the researched. The third and fourth stages of listening focus on *how people talk about relationships* in terms of their own experiences of "the context of social structures within which they are embedded" (McDowell 1997, 394). In listening to gamers, particular emphasis was placed on the ways in which they struggle against and contest certain power relations that attempt to constrain or oppress their identities. Similar to McDowell (1997), using the listening guide raised my awareness of how important power relations might influence the interview process and also the interpretation of data.

The online spaces of gaming forum websites were unexpected but beneficial sites of data collection. They involved open and ongoing conversations between myself and other forum users on each website. In some ways it is similar to an online focus group, where participants direct the 'ebb and flow' of much of the discussion. Once forum discussions had come to an end, they were copied and printed. Analyses of these discussions were in keeping with approaches grounded in autoethnography, involving an iterative process which highlighted cultural discourse while 'in the field'. This involved the sorting of data in order to detect and interpret thematic categorisations, as well as searching for inconsistencies and contradictions, and considering findings in relation to what is happening and why (Kozinets 2010).

Online questionnaires were collected via Survey Monkey then printed out. I utilise Kozinets' (2010) approach for data analysis of completed questionnaires, which analyses and thematically codes participant responses, involving the use of key terms such as 'love', 'intimacy', 'cybercheating', 'sexuality', 'pvp' [player vs. player], and 'offline love'. This aids in highlighting both the commonalities and the differences across participant responses (Kozinets 2010). Where applicable, reflections or remarks about the data were recorded in the margins of the completed questionnaires, and in order to illustrate the global reach of this research, each participant's country of residence was noted. This particular method of coding and analysis also occurred with participant's follow-up email questionnaires, where data was sorted to identify similar key terms, relationships, as well as distinct differences. Research data was then sorted a second time to check and refine the emerging patterns across key areas.

Gaming is an activity that relies heavily upon visual stimulus and it is therefore crucial to reflect on forms of visual analysis. Rose (2001, 16) states that ways of seeing are socially specific, influenced by history, geography, and culture, and argues that "how you or I look is not natural or innocent. So it is necessary to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking." Screenshot images were also collected from several participants, therefore, Rose's (1993, 2001) description of visual analysis plays an important role in this study, as it highlights the diversity of discourse and provide another form of articulating intertextuality within particular contexts.[24] Rose (2001) also points out that the use of visual methodologies allow for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of symbolic qualities within text, and how they connect with the wider cultural environment.

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[24] 'Intertextuality' refers to "the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts" (Rose 2001 136).

**Ethics of doing online research**

In recent years the use of online methods has increased significantly, raising various issues regarding online research ethics. As Madge (2007, 654) points out, it is obvious that "many ethical issues of onsite research are directly translatable to the online context, but there is also a need for existing ethical principles to be examined in the light of these new virtual research strategies". Madge (2007) also discusses how there is a growing number of geographers using online methods, yet, there is relatively little written work relating to the ethical issues of doing online research. In the following paragraphs, I discuss certain aspects of conducting ethical online research as it relates to this project.

All participants who took part in this research were provided with a brief outline of the study. Prior to all face-to-face interviews, participants were emailed an information sheet, and were encouraged to contact the researcher if they had any questions. Online participants were recruited via online gaming forum websites, which displayed a full information sheet within the online post. Interested participants were invited to click on a link that would take them to a Survey Monkey online questionnaire. When they did that they were directed to an Introduction page, which highlighted the name of the study and informed them that continuing with the questionnaire would direct them to further information about the research. This then took them to an information sheet which outlined the study (see Appendix 1).

The information sheet formally introduced the research and the researcher, as well as the main aim of the study. It also contained details about the recruitment criterion, and highlighted participants' rights. Questions about the research were also received within the online forums. For example, this was posted:

> Forum user: I would take the survey but I'm not sure I want to talk
> about some off the stuff thats gone on in wow for me.

Me: It's totally your call but the survey is completely anonymous. In the survey questionnaire you provide some details, such as gender etc, as well as your email. But I only contact people for follow-up questions if they agree to it at the end of the survey.

Also, any information that you provide is anonymised so that no-one (not even you) is recognisable in any write-ups that I do - and this includes your game characters. So in other words, you can tell me as much as you like (which is preferred), or as little as you like (which is still okay).

Hope this helps 😃

In an effort to ensure that the people who participated in this research were actual (real) people, the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences requested that I include a question that asked each participant for their email address. Doing this worked out well for two reasons. One, it confirmed people's questionnaires were in a sense valid, and two, it provided me with people's contact details if they chose to participate in the follow-up email questionnaire.

Interestingly, many forum users are aware of the lack of credentials of people conducting 'informal' online research. I was careful in gaining permission from all forum administrators before I posted and also added a note to the top of my forum entry stating that my research was sanctioned by that particular moderator, however, and during my first attempt at posting a user, who was not so polite, questioned my right to advertise the project within the forum space. I replied confirming that my post had been approved, and shortly afterwards, the moderator chimed in by editing this user's comment, effectively overwriting it with his own statement, saying: "Be nice. this has been approved by the higher

ups 😊". The second round of recruitments from online gaming forums was more successful than the first. I would argue here that the success of the second was directly related to the degree of my own engagement and autoethnographic approach within these forums as an active participant, which positioned me as both a researcher and a gamer. Gibbons and Nuttall (2012, 1228) make a similar argument, stating that in order to "maximize the quality and quantity of e-survey responses" researchers need to adopt an approach that connects the use of online e-surveys with an autoethnographical approach.

**Positionality, personality, and autoethnography online**

Over the past several decades, feminist theorists have readily acknowledged the complex and multifaceted ways in which knowledge is produced (Cook 2005b; Rose 1997; Valentine 2002). They have argued successfully against the notion that knowledge is objective and neutral, and repeatedly provided valid arguments that have aided in the conceptualisation that all knowledge is subjective[25] and embodied. Moser (2008, 384) states that "the past two decades have brought a growing recognition that we never shed our identities or biographies to become neutral observers", and "the reality is that researchers will not all produce the same findings because "we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position" (Hall 1992, 258). Part of recognising this facet of positionality includes acknowledging that researchers do not seek universal truths, only partial truths from a particular positioning (McDowell 1999).

Throughout this research, my position as both a researcher and a gamer has been fluid and evolving. My own background in relation to gaming saw me playing multi-media video games from a young age. I was about 8 years old when my mother came home with an Atari machine that contained games like Video Olympics, Pac-Man, and Combat that we could play on the television. In my teens,

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[25] Subjective research is that which acknowledges the personal judgments, experiences, tastes, values, and so on of the researcher (Cook *et al.* 2005a).

I tried many different PlayStation games, which at that time consisted of non-networked/offline games played via the television. I dabbled in computer games but it was not until my mid 20s that I owned a computer and was able to play and 'clock'[26] my first 'hack and slash' role-playing game – Diablo.

When I first embarked on this research I was 37 years old and had little experience with online games, or any other sort of online socialisation outside of Facebook. As such, I was not well versed in the various cultures of online gaming environments, and considered myself to be an 'outsider'. Fast forward to the present day and I have spent almost five years gaming in WoW. I almost always game at home when I play WoW but on a few occasions I have taken my laptop with me while travelling in order to log into the game, say 'hi' to friends and continue the progression of my avatars. The actual number of hours I have spent playing WoW is difficult to discern, as like most gamers, I have one or more characters which I consider my 'mains' (these are the avatars that I play WoW with the most often). My primary main is Asha (a blood elf paladin), and I have spent approximately 125 days playing WoW as Asha. I also have two other mains with lesser hours played, and several others that I rarely play. Then there are the avatars that I played and deleted due to various reasons associated with particular character constructions. Therefore, after having accumulated many hours of game time on many different avatars, I feel like an 'insider', as there is a degree of familiarity and sameness, and I am now comfortable within online gaming environments (this also includes playing other MMORPGs like Wildstar, Guildwars 2, and Diablo 3).

Identifying myself as a mature woman gamer explicitly highlights my political positioning. As such, all of the above (and much more) constitutes my subjectivity as a whole. Morrison (2010) states that "embodied subjectivity is intimately connected with my research and research practice, and I 'live' my research on a

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[26] To 'clock' a game means to successfully complete all levels until you reach the end of the game.

daily basis". It is in this sense that I work to collect, analyse and comprehend information from within this nucleus of positionings. Many theorists, including McDowell (1999, 409) agree that it is the researcher's "responsibility to recognize and take account of [their] own position, as well as that of [their] research participant[s], and write this into [their] research practice". Moser (2008) observes that positionality has been employed as a strategy to aid in contextualising research observations and interpretations, which can involve the researcher uncovering key political aspects that are central to self. Moser (2008, 384) highlights several feminist theorists (see, for example, Cupples and Kindon 2003; England 2005; Madge 1993; Rose 1997; Skelton 2001) who write about how positionality is crucial in the process of knowledge production, also revealing their own positionalities in order "to explain what occurs subsequently and to provide new positions from which to speak". Moser (2008, 384) notes:

> While some have criticized this move towards the personal as contributing to a never-ending spiral of relativism (Parker 1992), others have argued that the personal does not mean that scholarly work is weakened as a result, but rather revealing the social structure or position from which one writes can actually lead to more insightful analyses (Harding 1987).

The above demonstrates that geographers have been emphasising the importance of situated knowledge/reflexivity/positionality for quite some time. Although it is conceptually linked the subject of personality is seldom directly referred to. This is a pertinent point, as it has been my experience in this research that a lack of a vivacious 'personality' can be extremely detrimental to the successful engagement of online participants. For example, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, my first attempt at using an online gaming forum to recruit participants did not prove to be very successful, and this was in part due to my fear of negative appraisal and resulting hesitancy to put myself 'out there'. In my second attempt, I was much more forthcoming with my comments, and the comments that I did post were

constructed in a way that encouraged interactions with other users. For example, I initially found some of the posted comments slightly unsettling, as I was not accustomed to the flirtatiousness of the online environment, let alone a forum that is accessible by the general public. I also believe that if I had not been conducting research, my comments would not have been as 'playful' as they were. At this point in time, I had only recently started to play WoW and was unaware of how much the element of flirtation would be an 'everyday' part of my gaming experiences (and I discuss this in further detail in Chapter 6). When I did get used to the forum dialogue I actually found it enjoyable, and this showed in a positive outcome with more and more people posting stories about friends that they had in-game, who had become romantically involved with one another. Also in these instances, I reciprocated by sharing my own stories of online friends. This in turn aided in building rapport not just with one person but with a community of forum users.

Throughout this research I attempted to maintain an 'ethnographic sensibility' which Butz (2010, 140) describes as maintaining a "sensitivity to the autoethnographic characteristics of what we learn from research participants as well as from our own situatedness in relation to the people and worlds we are studying". The following discussion in this chapter draws upon some of my own experiences while conducting research, as both a gamer of WoW, and as a researcher. There is a growing volume of literature that explores the methodological approach of autoethnography. Butz and Besio (2009, 1671) state that researchers performing autoethnography need to maintain a self-reflexive positioning that places them within the context of the research. In a similar way, my research journey inevitably involved learning to navigate through various online environments, their existing social networks and the forging of new social relationships and expanding networks. Shaw (2012b, 3) argues that her own experience of using autoethnography as a research method led her to conclude that:

When something jolts our memories about a place, an event, a cultural formation, or invokes a feeling, those memories sometimes provide random clues to fields of detail that enrich our research project. Sometimes, they provide a basis for more critical appraisal of our engagement in the research itself, as a process. It seems a little disingenuous to ignore our memories, or pretend that they belong to someone else. Worse still is the act of brushing them aside because researchers need to maintain a professional separation between *us*, and *them* (the 'real' participants) (emphasis in original).

I began this study as a researcher but over the course of the project I gradually found myself becoming a 'real' participant (gamer). For example, in the beginning of my PhD I was not, in any way, what one would consider an accomplished online gamer. My masters thesis examined women (30 years or older) who gamed at home, and the majority of these women did not play in online social environments. While this study was small in scale, it did enable me to expand my insights on gaming and the idea for the research for this thesis came from the interviews with these participants (Todd 2009). Previous to WoW, the only other MMORPG I had played was Guildwars. While I enjoyed playing Guildwars, none of my offline friends were playing at the time and I found very few opportunities for forming new online relationships or networks. Therefore, my experience of the game was similar to that of an offline game, and it involved very little social interaction. As such, I was playing it very much in a solo fashion, and as a result, I had little social interaction with other online gamers. In hindsight, I realise that my failure to create an online presence meant that I did not experience a very immersive form of online game-play.

During the five years that I have been playing WoW, I have become well versed and immersed in the digital environment. I went in with an open mind, not really knowing what to expect and have ended up with several long-lasting friendships

with people I have never met offline. They are my friends. One in particular, I would even describe as my 'best friend'. Offline, Steve is a 'six-foot-something' bouncer at a nightclub and approximately 15 years younger than me. Is this someone who I would have met and become friends during the course of my offline life? Probably not, but in an online game there are many types of unexpected or 'queer' relationships that become possible.

In a game such as WoW it is usual to meet new people on a daily basis. In my experience most of them have been friendly, however, there have been interactions with several gamers who have behaved offensively and at times, made me want to stop gaming all together. Also, as mentioned earlier, some of these interactions with other male gamers in WoW have led to flirtation and sexually suggestive comments from them when they realise I am a woman gamer. Looking back it is possible to see how my attitude towards online gaming has changed over the course of time. For example, when I was new to online gaming, there were times when I found the attitude and aggression of other players to be offensive and off-putting. While this was difficult at times, it had the effect of helping me to understand and appreciate the discursive practices that exist within online gaming cultures. As highlighted by Butz and Besio (2009, 1671), researchers should:

> Perceive themselves inevitably (even if not intentionally) as part of what they are researching and signifying . . . [and] conceive of research as unfolding in an expanded field where their own self-interested project of self-narration interacts with those of their research subjects in the context of an existing network of social relations.

Overall, my own reflections of gaming in WoW are that while there is much that happens in online games that could be considered inappropriate or rude, it is important to note that most people who game in MMORPGs tend to resist or become adept at blocking out negative elements of the game, such as sexual

advances, or unwanted comments from people who are 'trolling'. Trolling is a common occurrence in many online games and as a consequence, most gamers become suitably practised at ignoring these types of advances. I have found that being less affected by negative situations is somewhat liberating. In comparison to when I first started playing online games, my experiences (both positive and negative) have worked to increase my overall level of confidence both within online and offline environments. There has been much research that focuses on the negative impacts of gaming (see, for example, Hussain and Griffiths 2009; Stetina *et al.* 2011). There are also studies, however, that show the various benefits of socialising online, including increased levels of confidence and self-esteem both online and offline, which are directly related to people's involvement and activities within games and other social networking sites (see, for example, Bessière *et al.* 2007; Cole and Griffiths 2007).

Currently I feel comfortable with having an online presence, which is something that I had not anticipated. In fact, at first I was so used to playing offline that I was somewhat reluctant to jump into this realm of (seemingly) outspoken individuals. Now, it is difficult for me to imagine enjoying the game as much (as I do) if it did not involve some sort of interaction with my online friends and other members of the 'gaming community'. In actuality, on occasion when I am in-game and my friends are absent, I find that I lack the enthusiasm to play for any length of time on my own. This, more than anything, informs me that the social aspect of the game has had a significant impact on the way in which I prefer to play.

In WoW there are numerous social networks that certain players will be drawn to depending on their style of play and I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 5. Overall, I have found gaming in WoW to be a positive experience, yet (as mentioned above) during this time I have also witnessed a continuous stream of commentary arising from public chat channels, where some players openly criticise and 'other' people. For example, in MMORPGs one of the most prevalent discourses in gaming is homophobia, where almost everything that is perceived as

bad or negative is typically associated with 'gay'ness. As a result, gamers with LGBTQ identities do not occupy a serious or safe space in MMORPGs unless they create it for themselves. In the following chapter I examine the ways in which homophobic discourse is resisted and challenged in WoW, such as via virtual pride parade marches, and the formation of 'gay friendly' guilds.

Moser (2008, 385) states that "how a researcher is positioned in society by sexual identity, age, social and economic status, gender, ethnicity, education and so on may inhibit or enable particular fieldwork methods and interpretations." On the one hand, this is very true, however on the other hand, some of these positionings (such as economic status and education) do not always factor into how other people are perceived within gaming forums, which are typically structured by categories such as gender and class. Rather, most often it is the combined use of avatar image, text and emoticons which play a crucial role in the development and representation of the virtual self.

Throughout this research, it has been my intention to destabilize the hierarchical nature of the researcher/researched relationship by reflecting upon my own personal experiences as a gamer and by achieving a similar level of understanding of the gaming environment as my participants (Holloway 1997). As previously mentioned, however, all research is 'subjective' and all researchers are linked to various socio-cultural networks, which in turn, serve to inform their understandings of certain phenomena. Therefore, it is ultimately the responsibility of each researcher to maintain a level of critical reflexivity in relation to the ways in which they come to make sense of the research data.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the theory and practice informing the methods employed in this research. Various qualitative methods consisting of both traditional and online research methods were utilised and informed by feminist thinking. These methods include online forum discussions, online questionnaires,

follow-up email questionnaires, screenshot images/photographs, face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography. The use of several online methods occurred due to participant preference, as this was the most convenient way for people to participate in the study. Overall, the use of these varied methods have aided in the gathering data that is 'rich', diverse and complex.

I have discussed the emergence and newly evolving role of online research ethics and how I used them in the overall design and implementation of this research. This is followed by a brief examination of my experience with internet gaming forums and online relationships. Here I discussed my progressive evolution from being a shy and inhibited forum user, to becoming someone who was more relaxed and forthcoming with my comments. I also highlighted several examples of flirtatious forum 'banter' and the ways in which my gender, sexuality, and 'availability' were brought to the fore of conversation by various forum users. In the last section of this chapter, I have highlighted both the ways in which my own subjectivities position me within the research, and the responsibilities that are carried by the researcher to maintain an awareness of their subjective experiences. I also reflect upon the role of positionality and personality while conducting online autoethnographical research. In the following chapters I draw on empirical data to discuss in-depth the ways in which participants construct and perform their sexed and gendered subjectivities while experiencing intimate relationships in the online game environment of WoW.

## CHAPTER 4: Avatars and gender/sexuality in WoW

In the 1990s many scholars saw the potential for the internet to become a 'queer space', where people could express a diverse range of identities – changing them as easily as they could change their clothes (Turkle 1995). As promising as this sounds, however, it has not happened. Take, for example, Laukkanen's (2007) study, which looks at marginalised gay and lesbian youth and their involvement with various internet communities. Laukkanen shows that some youth found the internet a safe place to express their sexual identity online before expressing it in real-life. Nonetheless, this is offset by the fact that all websites are monitored and regulated – one requirement being that users are typically required to provide identifying information when subscribing to an online community. Usually this involves the use of 'boxed' preset choices that potential subscribers must choose from in order to gain full access to the online community (O'Riordan and Phillips 2007).

It is now possible for people to portray their identities in a myriad of ways in online environments (such as in online role-playing games) but in practically every instance, the choices available are heavily dependent upon the classification fields (such as gender, age, sexuality and race) that are designed and preset according to normative categories. For example, internet users can be limited by built in classification codes regarding gender (i.e. male/female) and end-up being 'boxed' into standard categories of identification that disregard 'other' genders (Katz 2007). These predefined categories reflect, for the most part, real-world structured social relations which can be discriminatory and oppressive to minority groups (such as people with LGBTQ identities) who do not conform to hegemonic ideals.

It is in this sense that one sees how the supposedly unlimited freedom for self-representation in online environments is contextual (Laukkanen 2007). Yet, there is much evidence that supports an understanding of MMORPG spaces as 'new worlds'. For example, Jansz and Tanis' (2007) notes that the majority of gamers in their study play online due to the level of sociality, and of their participants, 80%

belonged to a 'clan'.[27] Game environments such as WoW come complete with their own social structure and economy, which are often perceived to be a "very real and viable alternative to the terrestrial world we currently inhabit" (Gunkel and Gunkel 2009, 105).

> MMORPG is not only difficult to pronounce but identifies a technology that is perhaps even more difficult to define. And expanding the acronym, massively multiplayer online role playing game, does not necessarily provide much help. Although these things are routinely called "games," research has demonstrated that they are much more than fun and games (Gunkel and Gunkel 2009, 104).

While Gunkel and Gunkel make a valid point, it is also important to note that the evolution of sexuality online continues to be restrained by heteronormative archaic value systems, which are carried into digital worlds via game design and the players themselves. For example, Valkyrie (2011, 77) argues that it is the reinforcement of these archaic value systems "that inhibit sexual exploration, demonize non-vanilla sex, and rely on essentialist assumptions to explain erotic difference". Much like offline, there are numerous examples of resistance to heterosexualised norms in the online spaces of games. According to Del Casino (2009), resistant spaces (such as public displays of queer identity in online spaces) contest dominant narratives of what is in-place or out-of-place. Thus, poststructural space is a "performed space of both power and resistance. As such, social identities are tied to how people perform where and who they are as individuals, community members, and social beings" (Del Casino 2009, 24). I go on to discuss these elements of resistance in further detail later in this chapter. In

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[27] A clan is much like a guild, in that it acts as a home base for players. They tend to be supportive places for new members and where more experienced players assist newer ones in gaining high level armour and gear.

the following section I outline the approach underpinning this research in relation to examinations of 'the body', and various aspects of online and offline identities.

This chapter, indeed this thesis, supports an understanding of cyberfeminism where it is impossible to simply 'leave the body behind'. Rather, emotion, bodily expressions and personality, online-sexuality and sexual desire are all important components of this research. In thinking about identities online I discuss the ways in which gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW. I also reflect upon various social categories, such as ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, bodies, heteronormativity, and queer identity. First, I begin by examining how online bodies (avatars) in MMORPGs play a crucial role in online identity, as they can affect not only a player's sense of self but also the way in which they play the game (including their interactions with other gamers), and consequently, affecting how other gamers perceive them. Second, I discuss the topic of gender-switching in games, paying particular attention to performances of gender that enable new ways of experiencing identity, which may, or may not transgress the boundaries between masculine and feminine subjectivities. Third, I examine further the practice of gender-switching and how it is normalised within gaming culture, and discuss the ways in which gender and sex are both contested and accepted within the digital space of online games. I argue that the term 'gender-bending', which implies that gender is being 'bent' somehow, is obsolete given that 'playing' with gender no longer appears to be a subversive act for gamers, but rather a normative choice. Finally, I discuss the extent of homophobic discourse that occurs within the mainstream/public spaces of online games, and what this means for players with queer identities, who form their own communities and supportive networks that both resist and challenge hetero dominant discourses in online games. In particular, I examine the Terms Of Use (TOU)[28] agreement used by Blizzard (the parent company of WoW), and refer to

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[28] For a full copy of the TOU agreement, see: http://sea.blizzard.com/en-sg/company/legal/wow_tou
.html

some of Blizzard's earlier dealings with players who were openly advertising their sexuality in-game, and who Blizzard believed to be in breach of their TOU agreement. In all of the above areas I look critically at how online games are fraught with discriminatory and oppressive discourses regarding non-heterosexuality, which for the most part, reflects and reinforces the sexual subjectivities and politics of the real-world. More importantly, I offer an examination of the various ways in which these dominant discourses are negotiated, transgressed and resisted within gaming culture.

## Online bodies

Butler's notion of gender performance in relation to online space opens up intriguing new avenues of discussion. For instance, Butler (2004) contends that the body is the central locus of gendered meanings, and argues, in particular, against the notion that gender identity is founded on a natural, sexual division between men and women (Butler 1993; 1999). Rather, Butler views sexual distinction as being "'performed' through a multiplicity of institutionalised social practices and sites of 'expert' power that invoke, materialise and naturalise sexual identity" (cited in Martin 2005, 100). Earlier discourses about corporeality and the internet tended to be utopian in nature, as they often claimed that the disembodied nature of online spaces created an online experience more aligned with egalitarian values. Feminist theorists were some of the first to point out the possibilities for experimenting with online identities such as gender-bending, however, there were others who were more sceptical when it came to perceiving the internet as a potential new utopian medium, and who were not so quick to dismiss 'the body' from online experiences (Featherstone and Burrows 1996; Kramarae 1998).

In WoW players assume the role of an avatar. Avatars are typically fantasy-based creations, which are influenced by various forms of being, such as elves, dwarves, magic users, as well as machines, cyborgs, animals, and necro (dead) bodies. Furthermore, these categories often merge – sometimes combining two or more

(see Figure 4.1). Essentially, in the initial creation stage a player can customise their avatar/s depending on the range of templates that are made available in each game.



**Figure 4.1: Screenshot of available genders (top-left), racial selections (left), and class selections (right) in WoW. The character depicted in the foreground is a worgen male, with a human male in the background. © Blizzard Entertainments**

It is usual for role-playing games to have a wide range of avatar templates, however, it is also usual for the bodies of avatars to be hyper-sexualised, in that they tend to be more hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine than offline bodies. As Shaw and Warf (2009, 6) note, however, despite how normalised hypersexualised images of women in videogames have become, "the most notable portrayal of women is actually their invisibility, with men represented on game covers four times more often than women". It has also become increasingly common for role-playing games in particular, to offer a wide array of options for avatar customisation. Therefore, there are many ways that gamers choose to re-present their online 'self'. For example, in MMORPGs like City of Heroes and Skyrim there are trillions of possible unique avatar and costume combinations that a user may choose for his or her virtual character (Ochoa 2012). The current racial selection of avatars offered by WoW includes: human; dwarf; night elf; gnome; draenei (human/goat); worgen (human/wolf); and pandaren (human/panda); orc; undead

(necro/human); tauren (human/bull); troll; blood elf; and, goblin. As well as choosing a race and although there are trillions of possible avatar customisation options available, a player's choice of gender is limited to either male or female. Within these categories, there are none that could be considered 'trans' identities. Each avatar must also have a specific class and these include: warrior; paladin; hunter; rogue; priest; shaman; mage; warlock; monk; druid; and, death knight (with some classes only being available to certain races).

An avatar's image, therefore, can be altered across a range of limited features, such as gender, race, age, body shape and size (but also), skin colour, facial features (eyes, nose, chin, cheekbones etc.), hair colour, body piercings, and tattoos (Taylor 2003). Unlike other games, WoW provides several avatar templates with varying ages and 'attractiveness'. It is interesting to note that while there are numerous choices available, avatars are usually 'attractive', young, and slim. It could be argued that some races in WoW are more attractive than others. Take, for example, goblins, trolls, orcs, and taurens, all of which are commonly referred to in online gaming forums as some of the 'ugliest races' in WoW.

Many of the choices that a person makes in relation to their online character's gendered appearance can also affect their offline sense of self, as well as the ways in which they play the game and interact with others (Todd 2012; Yee and Bailenson 2007). Culturally specific ideals influence what qualities people consider to be 'attractive' and this also applies to game culture. The race, gender and body templates in WoW offer gamers a selection of appearances with varying degrees of 'ugliness' and 'attractiveness'. Taylor (2003) states that empathic connections that players have to their in-game avatars alters their levels of immersion and affection, and that through empathy, players experience the game as narcissistic forces within that online environment. I have created several WoW avatars from different races, including blood elf, troll and goblin, of which the latter two are often described as unattractive avatars. According to Geraci and Geraci (2013, 335), the importance of avatar attractiveness differs in relation to gender and they state:

"men have low levels of interest in whether their male avatars are attractive but high levels of interest in attractive female avatars, and most who play female avatars indicate a desire for 'pretty' and 'sexy' avatars out of heteronormative desires." The female avatar bodies of night elves and blood elves in WoW are constructed in a sexualised manner. This is emphasised by certain racial characteristics, such as the female night elf, who if left unoccupied, will begin to bounce up and down on her toes causing her breasts to move. Geraci and Geraci (2013) also state, however, that players respond differently to the sexualisation of avatar constructions. In particular they argue:

> The sexualisation of videogame avatars participates in the social construction of gender norms and this process can disenfranchise players, but it also offers many players opportunities to reclaim, subvert, and/or transform gender norms and thereby experience feelings of empowerment (Geraci and Geraci 2013, 329).

It is common in online games to see flirtatious advances being made towards attractive avatars. For example, the song *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* (Day and Whedon 2009) is a well-known video clip that has recorded over 24 million views on YouTube. The lyrics and video clip parodies avatar performances of gender and sexuality, as well as flirtation and intimacy in online relationships:

> Do you wanna date my avatar? x2
> Hang with me in my MMO [massive multi-player online]
> So many places we can go
> You'll never see my actual face
> Our love, our love will be in virtual space
> I'm craving to emote with you
> So many animations I can do
> Be anything you want me to be
> C'mon, c'mon, and share a potion with me
>
> [Chorus]
> Do you wanna date my avatar?
> She's a star

And she's hotter than reality by far
Wanna date my avatar?



**Figure 4.2: Avatar Honeypants is a blood elf paladin. On left she is wearing raid style armour; and on right she is wearing 'bikini' style armour. Images used with permission from Mogoholic.weebly.com**

Finding the right 'look' for an avatar can be a serious matter for some gamers. For example, some players (like me) spend a lot of time farming[29] and collecting sets of armour for specific avatars (see Figure 4.2). Also, it is usual to see players commenting on various 'transmog' outfits being worn by other players. Transmog is short for Transmogrification, which means to "transform in a surprising or magical manner" (OxfordDictionaries.com 2013). Transmogrify was recently introduced to WoW[30] and it has provided players with more versatility in relation to shaping their online characters visually, according to their own preferences (see Figure 4.3). As a result, numerous online websites have been created by WoW gamers to showcase both their favourite avatars and the art of transmogrification

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[29] 'Farming' is a term used in WoW and refers to gamers who repeatedly return to particular areas with the intention of gathering specific items.
[30] Transmography vendors were introduced to WoW with the 4.3 Patch update, and as part of the Cataclysm expansion of WoW.

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(see, for example, WorldOfWardrobes.net, Mogoholic.-weebly.com, MogMyGear.com, and WowRolePlayGear.com).



**Figure 4.3: Transmogrify vendor located in the Horde city of Orgrimmar. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

There are specific vendors in WoW who players can visit and these vendors provide a transmogrification service (for a fee), which allows players to change their avatar's appearance. This is done by placing an image of their preferred item over the top of the item that is actually worn. The avatar 'Honeypants', for instance, in Figure 4.2 is wearing raid style armour (left), and 'bikini' armour (right). 'Bikini' style 'armour' presents an oxymoron in terms, as it juxtaposes elements that are contradictory. 'Bikini' style armour portrays a more sexualised image of female avatars. Players, however, now have the option utilising the in-game services of transmogrify vendors to alter their avatar's bodily representation, rather than settle for the image assigned to a particular piece of armour. Some gamers take great care to construct their avatars in such a way that they fulfil an ideal look or image. When this occurs, it is possible to understand the ways in which avatars can be seen as virtual embodiments of their creators. Avatars such

as these take on an element of fantasy, with their creators sometimes referring to them in close and intimate ways:

> Honeypants is my main, and has been since the end of BC [Burning Crusade] ... She's grown a lot from the healer I started off playing, and we've gotten a lot of achievements, gear and [riding] mounts along the way. While I can't ever imagine playing another toon because of the achievements and such, I also can't imagine it because playing her feels like home (Introduction to the avatar Honeypants on Mogoholic.weebly.com).

The ways in which gamers construct their avatar's appearance can affect their enjoyment of a game. My own experiences of moulding and shaping my avatar's look has helped me to feel more connected with my online identity (e.g. I am her, she is me). Since I began transmogrifying the armour of my avatar I have been complimented several times on my digital appearance, and like me, most of the participants involved in this study express a desire for more avatar customisation options. Various participants, for example, also comment on this, with Jenny (37, interviewee) stating: "I think there should be even more [options] so that I can completely tune into whatever character I'm making." Tricia said: "I think it is difficult to make a female character that looks cool. You're stuck with ugly, or conforming really", and Kevin remarked: "I generally play blood elf as I hate the way humans are designed, I would prefer if my blood elf rogue had a less bitchy voice, I hate the armour design so I would change that too".[31] It is important to note here that Kevin's remark about his avatar having a 'bitchy' alludes to a derogatory discourse regarding stereotypes of women who overly complain. Colin also comments:

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[31] At the time of these interviews the news of the upcoming transmogrify feature in WoW was only just starting to circulate.

I think most of the options are pretty good. When we got bored of
WoW I tried Aion with a couple friends … which had some really
good options, like height, muscle mass, facial hair, tattoos which
would have been good in WoW. A few more races would be a good
addition too.

In comparison, several other participants expressed satisfaction with the
customisation options available in WoW. For example, both Jack and Brandon
explain that their avatar's appearance was not especially important because the
game is typically played through a long-distance lens, and features, such as hair
and face are not often focused on close-up. While the importance of avatar
appearance differs among MMORPG players, Yee's (2008) research (with WoW
gamers) shows that most prefer to create avatars that reflect their own
stereotypical traits, such as age, height and gender. Weight, however, is typically
treated differently, as the majority of players prefer to game with avatar bodies
that are more closely aligned with 'ideal' or 'thin' body sizes. Also, quite often tall
players prefer taller avatars, women prefer feminine avatars, and men prefer
masculine avatars. This was certainly true for one of the members in my guild,
who is over 6ft tall. This particular guild member Steve (who I have mentioned
previously) ended up changing the race of his online character from a blood elf to
an orc, specifically because he did not like the slight build and shorter stature of
the blood elf avatar.[32] It is not uncommon for gamers to 'try out' different avatars,
which is what Steve confirmed when I asked him why he chose to construct an
avatar when he was already uncertain as to whether he would enjoy playing as a
male blood elf.

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[32] Blood elves were first introduced into WoW with the expansion The Frozen Throne. After the
undead scourge destroyed the high elf capital of Silvermoon, along with most of the high elf
population, the majority of the surviving high elf population left to follow Prince Kael'thas and from
that point began calling themselves the Sin'dorei, which translates "children of blood". Hence, in
remembrance of their loss, they are now known as 'blood elves' (Blizzard Entertainment 2014b: Blood
Elf. Retrieved 9 April 2014 from http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/race/blood-elf).

In most games there are female avatars that can easily be defined as masculine or 'butch', however, it is rare to find an effeminate male avatar. In WoW, for example, blood elves are widely considered to be one of the more 'attractive' races, and compared to other males across the range of races available, male blood elves have a more slender build that closely resembles female blood elves. Furthermore, 8 out of the 10 hair styles available for male blood elves offer long straight hair. As a result, the body, face and hair selections for male blood elves do little to distinguish them apart from females of the same race (see Figure 4.4).



**Figure 4.4: Avatars of the blood elf woman (left) and man (right) in WoW. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

Prior to the inclusion of blood elves, the only other races in the Horde included orcs, taurens, trolls, and undead, all of which are depicted in very artistic, yet menacing ways. As a result, blood elves stand-out from the other Horde races and are typically viewed as more 'attractive', or more 'beautiful'.[33] The addition of 'attractive' characters in the Horde line-up has also been protested by numerous gamers who believe that their artistic appearance disrupts the quintessential image of the Horde faction. Therefore, it is common to see male blood elves being

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[33] Also, the blood elves' capital city of Silvermoon is depicted in a variety of brighter colours. In comparison, the other Horde races are portrayed with a palette consisting of much darker colours.

ridiculed by other players for being too 'pretty' or 'girly' looking. Most gamers have their own ideas about what avatars are more 'attractive' or 'ugly', and it is common-place to witness arguments between gamers about which avatar is best. Other factors influencing gender performances also need to be considered. As Fox *et al.* (2013, 931) highlight:

> There is a marked disparity in how men and women are portrayed. Female characters are more likely than male characters to be portrayed in a sexualized manner ... Although some argue that this content is "just a game," scientific evidence suggests that there are both short-term and long-term effects from exposure to sexualized representations of women. Sexually explicit and objectifying depictions of women have been linked to self-objectification ... rape myth acceptance (i.e., false beliefs about rape that blame the victim) ... acceptance of interpersonal violence and violence against women ... and aggression.

It is important to introduce these issues here as they are dominant discourses in online games, however, they are discussed in-depth in Chapter 6. As a race, blood elves are designed to be more arrogant and flamboyant, and the WoW's designers often add blood elf non-player characters (NPCs) to specific areas of the game. For example, the Brawler's Guild was introduced in a recent expansion and it holds a fighting arena with several NPC vendors. One particular vendor is a bartender located in an alcove where players can go and sit and enjoy a virtual alcoholic beverage. Just inside the entrance to the bar is a blood elf NPC with the name of "Duke Studlington", who performs an unending dance rendition of the male blood elf (see Figure 4.4). If a player talks to Duke, he will respond with one of three random phrases, one of which includes: "I beat up three orcs and a tauren last night, all without breaking a nail". The other two phrases are: "Do you even lift, bro?" and "You want a knuckle sandwich, chump?" The ridicule of male blood elves is clearly evident in WoW given the prominence of homophobic discourse in

these online environments. Sunden (2009, 3, emphasis in orignal) states that the repeatedly derogatory use of the word 'gay' is a clear sign that gamers are assumed to be straight, and "for queer gamers, sexuality figures quite intimately as part of game culture in ways that suggests play at odds with the ideal player – *a player who is at least symbolically male and straight*."



**Figure 4.5: Duke Studlington performing his dance rendition. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

Male blood elves have a similar stature and build to that of female blood elves (see Figure 4.5). The comment "male blood elves are so gay" was made by Steve (the guild member mentioned above). As stated, Steve did not like the look of his blood elf character and this resulted in him making a race change to his avatar. What is not mentioned, however, is the fact that prior to changing his avatar's race, Steve first tried several other things to 'improve' its appearance, such as changing the armour and equipping his avatar with dual one-handed swords. Unfortunately for Steve, these alterations did not work, as the changing of armour had minimal effect

and the swords ended up looking like they were too large for the blood elf's slight stature.

There were several instances where Steve pointed out to me and to other guild members how ridiculous he thought his avatar looked when performing actions like running with two huge swords at either side of his waist, or when dancing (which can be initiated by a player typing in the command "/dance"). While dancing is not typically considered to be a masculine activity, some of the male races in WoW, such as the Undead have very masculine dances that involve a lot of jumping up and down, and 'punk rocker' head banging dance moves. The male blood elf dance, however, is often joked about and cannot be defined as masculine. Rather, it is more sensual and involves, among other things, a wide 'air guitar' arm swing combined with hip thrusting movements. Steve was not the only participant to comment on the sexual identity of the male blood elf, with Brandon (32, online participant) stating: "everything about the night elves seemed to suit being a rogue the best. This being the case, I had to choose either male or female night elf. Unfortunately the male night elves look so unbearably queer that I had to choose a female". While male blood elves are commonly joked about, there are some who appreciate their design. For instance, in her ethnographic research, Sunden (2009, 1) states that "male blood elves are routinely read along the lines of male femininity – or 'gay' – and as such cherished among queer gamers".

While factors such as age and gender remain similar between gamers and their avatars, other factors such as weight are a different matter. For example, Ducheneaut *et al.* (2009) found that people with significantly high BMIs (body mass index) preferred to create avatars that reflected a more slender and idealised version of themselves. Body weight in digital games is yet another aspect of real-world body politics that influences the ways in which people choose to re-present their 'self' in online games. Once an avatar is created it has its own base template. Cosmetic appearances, such as hair and accessories can be modified in-game for a small fee by visiting a barber. Other changes, such as race, gender and name

changes are more difficult and involve utilising Blizzard's paid services.[34] Typically, these latter changes are taken more seriously by players, as they involve the transfer of real-world money.

All of these points about the creation of avatars raise the question, is gender is a fluid concept in gaming? On the one hand, people are 'trying out' different ways of being. Yet, on the other hand, dominant values and norms within these same game spaces can have an exclusionary affect on marginalised identities and feeling 'in place' or 'out of place'. Some games (such as Two Worlds) do not provide players with gender options, and when you play the game, you have to play as a man. In the past, I have gamed as a virtual man (in Two Worlds), but interestingly, I found it difficult to enjoy the game in the same way that I do when I am playing as a virtual woman. For me, the enjoyment of gaming comes from having an avatar that is of the same gender, where I am able to look at the screen and see, what I believe to be, an idealised version of my offline self.

In other words, I find it difficult to enjoy the game fully, including any achievements or accomplishments if I cannot see myself in the virtual character. As such, I am unable to feel the same sense of connection with my avatar if the gender being digitally represented does not reflect my own. For example, when I first began playing WoW, I created a new character that was a female blood elf paladin. Since that time, I have kept her as my main avatar (now over five years). I continually worked to maintain her status as a high level paladin (which at the moment is level 90, with high ranking item level gear[35]). I spend several hours each week working to improve upon her current levels by completing dungeons and

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[34] Blizzard offers players several different services, such as appearance changes and character transfers to other realms. Most of these character level changes incur a cost. For example, if a player wants to change their character's race (such as in Steve's case), they would first have to pay an online fee of $25 U.S. dollars to complete the change.

[35] An avatar's item level is determined by the armour that they are wearing, as each piece of armour has an item level assigned to it. Basically, higher armour levels make it easier for avatars to achieve success in the game.

raids, which allows me to collect valor points[36] that are used to purchase higher level items. Many of the participants in this study also feel the same way about their 'main' avatars and describe them in ways which imply a connection. Susan (online participant), for example, has given some thought to how her avatars become representative of her identity while in-game, stating "the vast majority of my toons are female, probably heterosexual ... and I just use them to convey my own thoughts".

Raids range from 10 to 25 players and I often find that it necessary to group up with players who are unknown to me via the Looking For Raid (LFR) queue system. Many players prefer not to use this system as there are often players who may not know the fighting strategies, or who under-perform and cause the raid group to fail, at which point the entire raid group must start over again. These particular instances have been informative for this research, as they provide numerous examples of how gamers perform within a specific context. My experience, for example, of using this system has not always been positive, as it often involves many arguments between gamers, and takes a long time as there is usually a waiting period for raid members to be replaced as typically players tend to 'rage-quit' due to high levels of animosity. Nonetheless, in order for an avatar to achieve higher levels (and also for those who do not belong to guilds that regularly undertake raids), LFR instances can been extremely useful for obtaining higher level armour for an avatar. While LFR often presents a challenging environment for raiding, it also affords many opportunities for learning to communicate in a strategic and co-operative manner that is rarely heard of in an offline context.

In total, I currently have eight different characters in various stages of progression. The time it takes to get a character to the highest level (level 90 at present) depends on the time a person is willing to dedicate to playing the game. For instance, my

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[36] Valor points are a form of currency that is earned through completing dungeons and daily quests. Valor can be exchanged for armour and weapons that make one's avatar more powerful.

very first character took less than three weeks to take from level 1 to level 80. I have been, however, less involved with my other avatars, some of which I have been working on getting to higher levels for several months. More recently, I spent a lot of time farming[37] lower level dungeons and raids for set items, in order to use them for transmogrifying my paladin's armour and weapons, in order to experiment with the aesthetic appearance of my online self (see Figure 4.6). In their study on gamers' relationships with avatars, Ducheneaut *et al.* (2009, 1157) state that "as one's tenure in a given VW [virtual world] increases, their offline and online personalities become more congruent, perhaps to the point of becoming identical." Other studies have also examined the links between player and avatar (see Besseiere *et al.* 2007; Ducheneaut *et al.* 2009; and Suh *et al.* 2011). Besseiere *et al.* (2007), for example, explore the correlations between players' levels of psychological well-being and the extent to which online avatars embody favourable attributes. Suh *et al.* (2011) point out that the extent to which avatars are capable of reflecting their users is still developing and they examine how gamers build identities in relation to their avatars.

Their findings show that if an avatar (as another self in the digital world) looks similar to the user, there is a greater degree of cognitive and emotional connection between the two. I do not think of Asha as being an accurate physical representation of my offline body. Yes, we both have dark hair, green eyes and a similar height, but she is also thinner and younger, and to point out the obvious, she is blood elf and I am human. There are, however, other ways that I view Asha as an embodiment of my online 'self'. For example, I consider the past five years gaming in WoW as a positive experience as it has not lessened my level of self-confidence but instead added to it both online and offline. Also, there have been several elements of online play, such as forming personal friendships with other online gamers and being a part of an online community that have worked to

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[37] Farming is a gaming term and refers to the collection of various materials, which can be found in-game. In this instance, I have run through lower level dungeons and raids in order to 'farm', or collect the armour and weapons that drop from the corpses of the non-player character (NPC) and bosses.

enhance my sense of connectedness with my avatar Asha, as she is the virtual 'me' within this online environment. Therefore, over time I have come to view Asha as an extension of my offline self.



**Figure 4.6: My main avatar Asha, wearing items farmed from various dungeons, raids and mobs. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

Portraying one's self as an attractive avatar is an important element of game play for many people. Ducheneaut *et al.* (2009, 1159) state:

> … while most users create avatars that look different from their physical bodies, it is worth noting that almost all of these changes are in directions that Western popular culture would consider "improvements" - that is, users tend to create thinner, younger,

more fashionable versions of themselves. So while avatars are indeed a vehicle for identity exploration, they seem to be used mostly to experience physical appearances that match or exceed a society's norms about attractiveness.

Banakou and Chorianopoulos (2010) found in their online study of Second Life that attractive female avatars were treated more favourably. While examining social encounters they also found that close to 58% of successful social encounters occurred with attractive avatars, compared to 31.5% with unattractive avatars. During the course of this study, several participants (all women) commented on instances where they received an invitation to trade with another player who they did not know, and upon accepting the invite, they were given gold and other valuable items for free. Occurrences such as these happen across both genders but in gaming it is often assumed that only attractive female avatars are offered 'freebies'. Other studies have confirmed that in some instances female avatars often receive more assistance, handouts, or freebies than virtual male characters (see, for example, Griffiths *et al.* 2003; Yee 2003a). Often it is not known if the person behind the avatar is of the same sex as their online self, therefore, men who use female avatars as digital representations (also known as gender-bending or gender-switching) experience the same encounters. In the following section I discuss various aspects of gender-switching and the associated discourses in contemporary mainstream online role-playing games.

**'Playing with' gender**

Hansbury (2011, 135) suggests that for many people, exploring digital space is very much like "playing in a transitional space ... the space between the inner and outer world". Here Hansbury is referring to the two-way mutually constituted relationship between digital and the real-worlds that all gamers (and internet users) learn to navigate each time they log-on. As mentioned above, many gamers are well versed in the practice of gender-switching in online environments, which gives credence to Butler's (1990) argument that highlights how ideas about biology

become reiterated and prescribed through performance. As such, gender is understood as a performance, where masculinity is not just restricted to men and being male, nor is femininity restricted to women and being female. Kennedy's (2002) examination of the game Lara Croft: Tomb Raider highlights how the act of switching gender can present the player with a new way of examining the fusion between avatar and gamer. She argues that the relationship between a player and their avatar can be viewed as:

> ... a kind of queer embodiment, the merger of the flesh of the (male) player with Lara's elaborated feminine body of pure information. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity (Kennedy 2002, unpaginated).

There is a growing volume of work (e.g. Hansbury 2011; Butler 1990; and Kennedy 2002) that enriches understandings of gender and virtual reality, however, it is also important to note that gamers have been experiencing different genders since the 1990s, and as such, the gender-switching that occurs in games has become a 'normal' activity within many gaming cultures, and as such, does not necessarily challenge the dominant status of heteronormativity within these spaces. Over the past several years, there has been a steady increase in the number of women playing games, as well as the number of virtual women who are depicted in games (as both leading characters and non-player characters (NPCs)). In many respects this could be viewed as a positive development, however, Schott and Horrell (2000, 37) contend that:

> Although gender representation has altered during the last decade, game developers openly state that their rationale for the inclusion of female characters is based upon the premise that they appeal more to the average boy gamer than an equivalent male character.

In other words, this increase in the number of women being portrayed in games is not being motivated by a need to encourage more women into playing video games, rather, it is being employed to appeal to the already dominant audience of male gamers. Similarly, Brown (2004, 47) notes that rising appeal of 'tough' women as main movie characters are extremely fruitful but difficult to interpret, stating:

> On the one hand, she represents a potentially transgressive figure
> capable of expanding the popular perception of women's roles an
> abilities; on the other, she runs the risk of reinscribing strict gender
> binaries and of being nothing more than sexist window-dressing
> for the predominantly male audience.

Due to the increasing popularity of female leading characters, the utilisation of opposite sex avatars has become a normal practice within online and offline RPG games, especially by men, but also by women, although to a lesser extent. In fact, it would be accurate to say that the only people who tend to find the act of gender-switching surprising anymore are non-gamers. For example, Yee's (2005c) research findings show that over 80% of men switch gender during play, and are seven-to-eight times more likely to gender-bend than women. Overall, one of the main motivational reasons behind why players like gender-switch is related to the ease in which they can shape and mould their characters in more ways. Typically, this occurs in many games because female avatars have more style and accessory options compared to their male counterparts, which is arguably reflective of offline social media advertising and stereotyping. As such, games that present players with the option of having customisable, strong, 'sexy' women as leading characters have been remarkably successful at attracting a large consumer base across all genders.

One research participant, Jenny (37, interviewee), identifies as a bisexual woman, and she spoke to me about her own experiences of gaming as a virtual man – one who meets, flirts, and forges relationships with other women.

> Jenny: In Sims online I was a guy and it's amazing how much work it was because throughout the time that I was online I stayed in character. I guess you could say I was role-playing because I was a guy, and then I made friends and relationships with people who thought that I was a guy … I mean it was completely different. Interacting with girls was easy but with guys, I had to have a certain restraint. I had to be almost sort of impersonal, sort of rough and gruff and it was tough [to perform that way] sometimes. It was really tough because I'm only going by how I see other guys interact, and I didn't want to give myself away by doing something feminine, or by them saying something like 'oh, are you gay?' I wouldn't have cared if that were the case but you know, I'm a guy and that's what I'm trying to portray.
>
> Cherie: Did you ever tell them that you were a woman?
>
> Jenny: No, I just stopped playing, and thank goodness because it was getting too tiring ... But see, what happened is that the more I waited, the harder it was to tell them. To me, playing as a man just happened on a whim and I probably should have changed it. But the people I had met, they were all so cool and they already knew me as a guy, and to them I was just like "the guy". In the beginning it was just fun and games and whatever, and you're meeting people but the more that time passes, you know, you *are* your character. And the girls would flirt with me and that's okay because I'm bi-sexual but they thought I was a guy. So it was a

> confusing, weird time, and I was so happy when I was done
> with it because I could stop, you know, the lie.

This comment by Jenny shows that she has an awareness of the ways in which her gender and sexuality could be assessed by other online users, and so she makes a conscious effort to maintain a masculine presence. It is during occurrences such as these that the constraints of online space become realised. Therefore, utilising game avatars can and does afford people new ways of experiencing different types of being, however, even these can become subjected to varying degrees of surveillance. Several scholars highlight the ways in which the 'panopticon' is present in online spaces (see, for example, Lyon 2001; Turkle 1995). In Jenny's case, she initially revelled in her online identity as a masculine character. While Jenny enjoyed this new embodiment and the company of her new online friends, she also began to feel tired from having to constantly think about her gendered performance, as well as feeling guilty about keeping her offline gender and sexuality hidden from her online friends. Gilmore (1990, 11) reflects on the notion of manhood and the testing of masculinity that occurs in socio-cultural situations, stating that:

> There is a constantly recurring notion that real manhood is different from simple anatomical maleness, that it is not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds. This recurrent notion that manhood is problematic, a critical threshold that boys must pass through testing, is found at all levels of sociocultural development.

Similarly, in their study of female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) and cyber-support, Gauthier and Chaudoir (2004, 375) state that FTMs are aware that "manhood is a test that is separate from simple anatomical maleness. Failure to pass the test carries a penalty of exclusion from the desired rank as well as stigmatization as

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deviant for having attempted such a feat." The above comments highlight the ways in which performances of gender in online spaces are often subjected to the same socio-cultural norms that exist in offline spaces. Jenny, for example, belongs to a minority group, in that, she is one of the few women gamers who regularly play as a virtual man. As stated, however, research shows that men participate significantly more in gender-switching activities than women (also see, MacCallum-Stewart 2008). During the course of this research, I had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of gender-switching with one of my offline friends, Jim (39, online participant) - a man who games predominantly as a virtual woman. Jim is someone who I have been gaming with for more than a decade and during that time I have rarely seen him play a game as a virtual man. In one of our recent discussions, I asked him: why do you chose to game as a woman, rather than as a man. Jim replied:

> Well if I'm going to be staring at a screen for several hours, I want something nice to look at and if a guy tells you otherwise, he's lying. In most games there's no difference now between men and women avatars. Women [avatars] are just as strong, if not stronger than men. So why not play as a woman? It just makes better sense – I've got something nice to look at *and* I kick ass (Audio conversation held via TeamSpeak[38] while gaming in Guildwars, 9 April 2009, emphasis in original).

Jim's comment reveals that while defending his preference for using women avatars, he simultaneously reiterates himself as heterosexual. It is also worth noting that Jim's answer was quite succinct, giving the impression that he may have either been asked this question before, or had previously spent some time thinking about it. MacCallum Stewart (2008, 35) states that "players are absolutely

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[38] TeamSpeak is a voice over IP software that allows users to speak on a chat channel with other users, much like a telephone conference call. Users typically wear a headset with an integrated microphone. There can be multiple users on one channel simultaneously.

unrepentant about the fact that they find the female avatars more attractive". This is an on-going topic that is continually debated amongst gamers, and evidence of it can be found on various internet sites, from in-game chat screens to website forums.

For many gamers like Jim, the act of gender-bending is a common experience. Although it is still discussed among users in online forums and chat channels, the actual term 'gender-*bending'* is somewhat obsolete, as gender is not really being 'bent', and 'playing' with gender is no longer considered a subversive act for the vast majority of gamers, but rather a normative choice. It is, however, these types of performances that enable a new way of examining gender identity, always with the potential to transgress boundaries between identity and desire (including the maintenance of the masculine/feminine dualism). In mainstream games homosexuality or 'queer' identity exists within a derogatory discourse of 'put-downs' and humour. In the public arena of online games, homosexuality does not typically occupy a safe or serious place, and very few game designers have made the effort to include LGBTQ characters as a serious design component. Shaw (2009, 229) argues:

> Among the factors affecting the representation of the GLBT community are the attitudes of those in the video game development community, the construction of the gamer audience, the expected backlash for having GLBT content, whether the structure of the industry allows it to face this backlash, and the potential for representing sexual and gendered identities in the medium.

MacCallum-Stewart (2008, 38) states that more than any other media, videogames allow players to "revel in their own embodiment as alternative beings". It is also important to note, however, that in many online role-playing games (such as WoW, Guildwars and Everquest) homophobic discourse is prominent and part of

the everyday norm. For example, when I began playing WoW I was disconcerted when I first saw and heard people using homophobic language in-game, such as "so gay", "homo", and "faggot". Yet, as a researcher, I was also aware that due to the consistent use of this language by other players, it started to become a 'normal' part of my gaming experience. During the course of this study, I have witnessed a constant stream of homophobic language as it gets typed into various in-game chat channels by other gamers, as well as the international group of people who I game with on a weekly (sometimes daily) basis. Matt and Regina (28 and 31, interviewees) first meet in WoW, but are now married with two children. In the past, they managed a guild together and welcomed people regardless of their sexual orientation. Regina states: "we've known gay people and it has never been an issue simply because we had a policy of not having anything against someone's sexuality." The fact that Regina and Matt had a guild policy that protected LGBTQ players shows that they were already familiar with sexual politics and discrimination in online games. Regina made several comments confirming this:

> If there was any carry on about two of the male guild characters getting together, they'd carry on just as much as anyone else just because it was funny … there was never anything said in a particularly serious way … It was a joke. … Girls [in the guild] don't seem to be quite so hung-up about making a joke of their sexuality, whereas guys will be like 'no, no, no' … and the number of times I've seen girls kissing each other just because it's funny, or to tease guys … but you'd never see two guys doing that … there would be much flaming[39] to be had.

Rubinstein *et al.* (2013) highlight how those who identify as LGBTQ are affected by stereotypes and negative attitudes. Regina's comment above highlights how some performances of sexuality are more taboo than others, and where lesbian and

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[39] Flaming is also known as bashing. It is a hostile interaction between internet users, involving the use of profanity and insults.

female bi-sexuality is constructed as being more socially acceptable (Yost and Thomas 2012). In discussing her own experiences of playing WoW and being a member of a LGBTQ guild *The Others*, Sunden (2009, 5) states that: "what is perhaps most striking when entering the [LGBTQ] guild, after having played elsewhere, is how queer sexuality and queer desire operate as explicit, humoristic, sometimes flirty resources in guild chat as well as in instances of co-play". *The Others*, Sunden (2009, 6) goes on to say is a "safe haven of sorts, a home away from home in World of Warcraft, a place with warm hearts and sharp tongues. It is a place with plenty of room for queerly playing up against, or transgressing the implied or ideal player." Similarly, my research findings – including my autoethnographic experiences of belonging to two hetero dominant (but LGBTQ inclusive)[40] guilds - have shown that a comparable style of humour also occurs. For example, Matt and Regina are leaders of a hetero dominant guild and their comments highlight how some performances of sexual identity are considered more taboo than others. This was the first time that I had interviewed anyone who discussed the implementation of a guild policy that outlined a need to respect other people's sexual identities. Many guilds do not make the effort to safe-guard against intolerance and discrimination, therefore in doing so, Matt and Regina make a genuine attempt to create a welcoming and safe space for LGBTQ gamers.

The above provides an example of how sexual subjectivities and politics in online games can reflect and reinforce sexual subjectivities and politics in the real-world. Resistances to homophobic discourse do occur (as discussed later in this chapter), however, during the time that I have been gaming, I have not seen anyone challenge the use of homophobic language in public chat. I have, however, witnessed several occasions where gamers speak out against the use of racist language within public chat. This, in comparison to the accepted use of

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[40] Here I make a clear distinction between the terms "LGBTQ inclusive" and "LGBTQ friendly". Both of the guilds that I have been involved with were hetero dominant, therefore, I use the term "LGBTQ inclusive" because both guilds did not exclude anyone based on their sexual orientation, and both have recruited LGBTQ players. "LGBTQ friendly" is a term typically used in recruitment advertisements by guilds wanting to attract the attention of LGBTQ players in particular.

homophobic language shows that non-heterosexual identities continue to occupy a space within the margins of online gaming culture. Later in this chapter, I go on to discuss the topic of LGBTQ identities in online role-playing games. In the following section I examine the various ways in which language and discourse are monitored and regulated in WoW, which in turn, affects the performance of gendered and sexual identities in this digital space.

**Discourse, governance and transgression (in WoW)**

Jennings (2008, 93) says, "it may come as a surprise to some, but there are a lot of people who spend a lot of time playing online games." In contemporary times, online gaming is an activity that is incredibly social on a global scale. As an online role-playing game, WoW allows gamers to connect with other players from all over the globe, and displays a language and culture all of its own. As is typical with any form of text, language is often broken down into a series of shorthand and anagram sentences. For example, when someone is looking to form a raid or dungeon group they will post something like, "LFM ICC, 10 man. Pst spec and ilvl." This is short for "Looking for more (LFM) players for Ice Crown Citadel (ICC), 10 players needed. Whisper (pst) your talent specification (spec) and item level (ilvl)."

At first, my own understanding of the shorthand language was insufficient to be able to decipher the messages appearing in WoW's chat channels, and I often had to ask guild members for a translation. Asking for assistance in deciphering the multitudes of anagrams being used in WoW can sometimes be an uncomfortable experience. Asking for any form of clarification signifies to others that you are something of a 'newbie' (new to the game), and 'newbie' status is often ridiculed, or not tolerated. I have witnessed several instances where 'newbies' were removed from groups because of their ability to inflict enough damage during boss fights, or they did not know the fight strategies and as a result they kept dying. Another instance that was embarrassing for me, involved asking another guild member what "bio" (short for 'biology' or 'bio-break') meant, to which they responded with

laughter, and explained that it meant "toilet". To the players of WoW, the game's customs and cultural rules rapidly become familiar, but to outsiders or non-gamers, they can be quite confusing (Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008).

Often it is imagined that a gamer is someone who is in their teenage years, unemployed, socially inept and male. This stereotype, which may have once held true, is rapidly changing. Gamers can no longer be defined by any one category, such as, gender. Rather, they have many identities and come from an array of backgrounds. Furthermore, many people believe that the fantasy worlds offered by MMORPGs like WoW are places where one can escape from real-world constraints, stereotypes and prejudices. The problem with this particular notion lies in the fact that many of our real-world constraints and stereotypes follow us into these digital worlds. For example, in WoW, female players are often harassed by male players (Yee 2005b). Racism is also witnessed and it is not uncommon to read racial slurs that are directed at specific players in public chat channels, or to see the topic debated in online WoW forums (Nakamura 2009; Weiss and Tettegah 2012). I have also experienced a number of incidents of harassment, such as being called a "stupid troll" by another player, unknown to me, who believed that I was in the wrong zone for my character's level - my character's race was 'troll'. I have also been criticised for being a female blacksmith, as on one occasion another player, unknown to me, said "you hammer like a bitch", which I assumed at the time to be a criticism of my avatar's feminine physique. Both situations occurred when I was relatively new to WoW and the culture of online gaming in general. At the time, I found these types of comments both offensive and off-putting. Also, I knew very little about the in-game options available for reporting inappropriate behaviour, and so most of the time I did not respond to these types of remarks. While I ignored the player who insulted my blacksmithing technique, I did 'poke tongues' in response to the player who called me a "stupid troll" (":-p").

In order to manage the ways in which players conduct themselves in-game, WoW uses the aforementioned Terms of Use (TOU) agreement. It is mandatory that

every new player must first agree to the terms stated before they can gain access to the game. In particular, the TOU agreement states that:

> When you choose a character name, create a guild, or otherwise create a label that can be seen other players using the Game or the Service, you must abide by the following guidelines as well as the rules of common decency. If Blizzard finds such a label to be offensive or improper, it may, in its sole and absolute discretion, change the name, remove the label and corresponding chat room, and/or suspend or terminate your use of the Service (Blizzard Entertainment 2010, unpaginated).

There are many acts that breach this agreement. For example, a perusal of any WoW forum will show several debates relating to various aspects of the game, including the usage of 'offensive' names (as outlined below). On this matter, Blizzard Entertainment's (2010) TOU highlights a number of restrictions and states that, in particular, players may not use any name:

- o That incorporates vulgar language or which are otherwise offensive, defamatory, obscene, hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable;
- o That belongs to a popular culture figure, celebrity, or media personality;
- o Belonging to any religious figure or deity;
- o Taken from Blizzard's Warcraft products, including character names from the Warcraft series of novels;
- o Related to drugs, sex, alcohol, or criminal activity;
- o Comprised of partial or complete sentence (e.g., "inyourface", "Welovebeef", etc);
- o Referring to pop culture icons or personas (e.g. "Britneyspears", "Austinpowers", "Batman");

o That incorporates titles. For purposes of this subsection, "titles" shall include without limitation 'rank' titles (e.g., "CorporalTed"), ... monarchistic or fantasy titles (e.g., "KingMike"), … and religious titles (e.g., "ThePope"). You may not use a misspelling or an alternative spelling to circumvent the name restrictions listed above, nor can you have a "first" and "last" name that, when combined, violate the above name restrictions.[41]

In reality, however, a vast number of user names violate the terms of this agreement. The use of names are not monitored, and it seems that only the names that are picked up by Blizzard and those that are reported by other players are subject to investigation by Blizzard's employees. While gaming in WoW I have seen multiple names that do not conform to the TOU. For example, in April 2013, I saw another player with the name "Nitchbigger" (which is an obvious play on the words "bitch" and "nigger") and reported it to Blizzard via the easy-to-use in-game reporting feature that all players can access if the need arises. The next day I did a search for "Nitchbigger" on Blizzard's web-based search engine,[42] and found that the character was no longer listed. This means that Blizzard responded very quickly to my report. My search via Blizzard's website, however, showed that the name "Nitchbigger" was also being used by a further 28 characters from different realms.

Any online visitor (gamer or non-gamer) can perform a search for character names, guild names etc, and my own exploration of WoW's database showed that there were numerous character and guild names that did not conform to the guidelines of the TOU agreement, as stated above. For example, in March 2013 I was able to locate 14 characters (using

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[41] For a full copy of the TOU agreement see: http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/legal/wow_tou.html

[42] Blizzard's home webpage and search feature can be found at http://us.battle.net/WoW/en/

several different spelling variations) named "nigger", and 155 characters called "Gayness". Furthermore, many of the banned names listed in the TOU above were also being used by multiple gamers. These included: Batman = 10 characters and 33 guilds; Inyourface = 213 characters; Austinpowers = 2 characters and 1 arena team; Britneyspears = 2 arena teams; and God = 12 characters and 32 guilds.

Similarly, Jennings (2008, 100) highlights user names that disregard Blizzard's TOU agreement, such as "Stynkfyst" (in reference to a sexual practice), "Pantyraider" (a name that implies sexual deviancy), and "Yahweh" (the name of God in the Torah). Jennings (2008, 100) goes on to ask the player with the Yahweh character if they know that the name of their character might cause offense to Jewish people, and the player responded by saying, "I know, I don't care." My own search for gamers found 47 characters called "Stynkfyst" (and a further 211 spelt as "Stinkfist"), 218 called "Yahweh", and 171 called "Pantyraider".[43]

During my search, I came across a Blizzard online forum for WoW, where the original poster (OP) wanted to use the name "TaylorSwift" but was worried about the potential backlash from WoW administrators. One of the replies to this post came from an official WoW Support Forum Agent:

> Celebrity names are technically against the naming policy - yes, I don't really recommend them.

> On an RP [role-playing] realm, that would be looked at more harshly, but it's always better to steer clear of things that have the potential to be reported.

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[43] Most of the names I mention also appear with spelling variations (e.g. 'stynkfyst' / 'stinkfist'), which means that the total search count listed for each name is likely to be higher than what I have recorded.

Our reaction to such a thing is reactive - it would have to be reported. We don't 'scan' names first - but once reported, yes, you are subject to possibly having it changed, and even potential sanctions on the account if such things have happened in the past.[44]

In short, all of the names mentioned above are, in some way, at odds with Blizzard's TOU agreement and in effect, disregard the "rules of common decency". In general, Blizzard will only enforce changes to names if they are reported by another individual. In my own experience, reporting a player for their choice of name can only be done while in-game, but this will only remove the name from your particular realm and not affect the numerous other players with the same name. This particular method of reporting, therefore, makes it impossible for any one player to remove the appearance of a specific name from the game. There are, however, other avenues, such as creating an in-game "ticket", or writing a constructive post in Blizzard's General forum, where the developers *might* read it, and *might* respond to it.

The regulations outlined in the TOU regarding chat are very similar to the rules stipulated when creating a character, guild and team names, which are, "to exclude any potentially disruptive element that could mar most players' ability to enjoy the game" (Jennings 2008, 100). In particular, the TOU rules regarding chat state:

Communicating in-game with other Users and Blizzard representatives, whether by text, voice or any other method, is an integral part of the Game and the Service and is referred to here as "Chat." When engaging in Chat, you may not:

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[44] The full forum discussion can be found at: http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/8568378201.

Transmit or post any content or language which, in the sole and absolute discretion of Blizzard, is deemed to be offensive, including without limitation content or language that is unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, hateful, sexually explicit, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable, nor may you use a misspelling or an alternative spelling to circumvent the content and language restrictions listed above […] Harass, threaten, stalk, embarrass or cause distress, unwanted attention or discomfort to any user of the Game (Blizzard Entertainment 2010, unpaginated).

In order to manage inappropriate language in WoW, Blizzard uses a built in word-blocker that scrambles all words that it considers to be negative or bad. It is possible to turn the auto-scrambler off via the in-game settings, however, every time a player logs out this option resets to the default setting (which scrambles all inappropriate words), and must be manually changed each time a player logs into the game.

While many players who share common interests often move on to audible forms of communication (such as Ventrillo, or TeamSpeak), the vast majority rely upon text based forms of communication to connect with other players. Text is sometimes used to alienate and ridicule other players. Yet, it also plays a vital part in uniting players to a common cause – from defeating raid and dungeon bosses in-game, to bringing offline events into the digital realm, such as promoting and celebrating Gay Pride month with the LGBTQ community in WoW (GamePolitics.com 2009). For example, see Figure 4.7, which shows a poster for the annual Proudmoore Pride Celebration in WoW.

**Figure 4.7: Proudmoore Pride Celebration poster (Queerious.com)**

**LGBTQ identities and homophobic discourse**

When I first began this research, I thought of most online spaces and digital worlds as places where people could experience a sense of freedom and liberation from the real-world, in other words, a place where you are free to be anything or anyone you wanted to be. I have come to realise, however, this is not entirely the case. On the one hand, people are finding amazing ways of living, experiencing and enhancing their lives through online games. On the other hand, this freedom or liberation is often subjected to varying forms of oppression. For the most part, sexual subjectivities and politics in WoW reflect and reinforce sexual subjectivities and politics in the real-world. Yet, while there is discrimination, there is also resistance. For example, Walmsley (2000, 17) states: "cyberspace might have annihilated distance, but not place". Concurrently, digital space can also be an important place for online communities. While it is often viewed as a continually developing place of exploration, online spaces also have many of the same dominant social queues that exist within the real-world, transported there by the

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very people who enter into it. Consequently, prejudices that exist in the real-world, such as racism and homophobia also exist within online environments. It means, however, that individuals and groups resisting these hegemonic norms also form in online spaces. As a result, many like-minded people form friendships and communities in order to make spaces of their own. Guilds are a good example of this, in that they enable players to recruit into their guilds other gamers with similar interests, such as players interested in PvP (player versus player) guilds, high level raiding guilds, casual/social guilds, and LGBTQ friendly guilds.

Many guild recruiters use WoW's chat channels to advertise their guild, and in WoW most players join a guild at some point, as the game is designed to encourage the growth of guilds. For example, belonging to a guild affords players certain perks that can aid them in making their avatars stronger, much quicker, as well as accessing other various in-game materials, such as armour, and weapons via the Guild Bank or Guild Vendor. Other members within a guild can also assist lower level membership with running high level quests, dungeons and raids. WoW's realm Proudmoore is home to the popular LGBTQ friendly guilds, which include The Stonewall Champions and The Spreading Taint. Both have large guild member lists, with the latter of the two numbering in the thousands, as they span across associate guilds, which are recognisable due to the fact that they all include the word Taint in their guild titles.

In 2006, Sara Andrews was the Guild Leader of Oz, a guild based in WoW's Shadow Moon realm. Andrews, a 25 year old transsexual from Tennessee, experienced conflict with Blizzard officials in 2006 after posting a recruitment advertisement in WoW's chat channel. The conflict occurred while she was gaming with her high-level avatar named 'Shimmre' while in locale called Stormwind City. Andrews was performing her usual guild recruitment call-out via the general chat channel, which she had done numerous times, and as always she added that her guild was "GLBT (gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual) friendly" (Peckham 2006). This time, however, another player laid a complaint with Blizzard, and Andrews

received a warning email from one of the game's senior account administrators informing her that her access to WoW had been temporarily suspended. The warning email also informed her she had violated the TOU agreement in relation to "Harassment – Sexual Orientation". Furthermore, Andrews was warned that the continued use of "both clear and masked sexual language which … insultingly refers to any aspect of sexual orientation pertaining to themselves or other players" would result in further action being taken (cited in Jennings 2008, 104).

Not surprisingly, Andrews was angered by this reaction to her recruitment advertisement, and sent several emails to Blizzard explaining that there had been an obvious misunderstanding and that in no way was her guild's recruitment advertisement meant to insult anyone, as she was simply attempting to recruit members for their "GLBT friendly" guild. Blizzard responded further, stating:

> We have determined that advertising sexual orientation is not appropriate for the high fantasy setting of the World of Warcraft and is therefore not permitted … While we appreciate and understand your point of view, we do feel that the advertisement of a 'GLBT friend' guild is very likely to result in harassment for players that may not have existed otherwise. If you will look at our policy, you will notice the suggested penalty for violating the Sexual Orientation Harassment Policy is to 'be temporarily suspended from the game.' However, as there was clearly no malicious intent on your part, this penalty was reduced to a warning (cited in Schultz 2006, unpaginated).

Andrews argued that she did not want to "recruit any other way, because there are WAY too many people on WoW that use REAL antigay terms, and I do not want those people in my guild" (quoting Andrews, cited in Peckham 2006, emphasis in original). Andrews also stated that she had every right to use the word GLBT, as it was not being used in a derogatory fashion. She explained to Blizzard

that they had made a "HUGE mistake … [Oz] is a place where GLBT players can come without being harassed or insulted for their sexual orientation with phrases such as 'That's so gay!' and 'That horde just ganked me! What a fag!'" (cited in Peckham 2006, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, Blizzard did not recant their position and stated that their rationale for the warning was in fact to protect Andrews from the expected backlash that would ensue from other players whose stances were anti-GLBT. As Del Casino (2009, 137) suggests:

> Virtual community spaces, like other spaces, are subject to social relations of power, to pressures to conform to certain socialized norms, and to sanctioned rules appropriate to a particular community. The practices of virtual spaces can be highly regulated, and they can produce knowledge that targets particular populations within the community.

Andrew's continued resistance to Blizzard's decision highlighted the fact that words such as 'gay' and 'fag' are derogatory and common-place in WoW. Yet, there are no repercussions for the players using these words. Indeed, Andrews' argument is accurate, as I have continually witnessed these types of remarks from when I first started playing WoW. For example, recently I was partied with a group of random players for the purpose of 'killing' a rare boss in the Isle of Thunder. The 'killing' of NPCs is required in order to complete a quest and these types of quest objectives are standard in WoW (and clearly aligned with highly masculinist discourses premised on the concept of war). This boss and others like it have the chance to drop a key that players can loot, allowing them to access another scenario in the game. On this particular occasion, the boss did not drop a key, and one player expressed their disappointment by making the comment "gay no key". In this context, the comment is a typical response by a gamer who has experienced a disappointing outcome. This is yet another example of a player reflecting their values and in the process constructing their sexual identity as 'straight' within this online space.

Blizzard's management response to Andrews' complaint is somewhat reminiscent of earlier 'censure the victim' policies, where cultures persecute women for 'tempting' men prior to their sexual abuse. Andrews, however, did not give up and circulated her story more publicly. Over the ensuing weeks it was picked up by multiple online forums, blogs and news sites.[45] In one particular online news article, Chonin (2006) asks, "how does this policy apply to Andrews' Jan. 12 post, which read, in part, 'OZ is recruiting all levels … We are not 'GLBT only', but we are 'GLBT friendly'"? Chonin makes an excellent point when attempting to answer this question, stating:

> The answer is simple. The policy doesn't apply. Andrews' post contained neither clear nor masked insults. Hence, no infraction. … If I parse [comprehend] correctly, what the folks at Blizzard are really saying is this: Forget the guidelines. By being openly inclusive of GLBT players, Andrews is inviting harassment. By inviting harassment, she is herself a harasser. Extend the logic and this means that, according to Blizzard, anyone who is openly gay is to blame for inciting homophobia. … In essence, Blizzard Entertainment is taking a policy intended to protect sexual minorities and using it against those same minorities.

This, and other similar responses to Andrews' conflict with Blizzard grabbed the attention of Llamda Legal, an LGBT legal defence and education group, who in support of Andrews, contacted Paul Sams, the president of Blizzard. Llamda informed Sams that "the mere mention of sexual orientation could not be construed as harassment – suggesting the potential for litigation on Andrews' behalf" (Jennings 2008, 105). While Llamda stated that the prevention of

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[45] The following are some (but not all) of the online sites that reported on Andrews' story: InNewsWeekly.com; terranova.blogs.com; WoW Insider; lawgeek.com; afterallen.com; bbs.stardestroyer.net; poormojo.org; news.bbc.co.uk; joystick.com; Kotaku.com; and 1up.com.

harassment is a worthy goal, they also stated that Blizzard's interpretation of the TOU in this particular case, was incorrect and challenged Blizzard to change their policies regarding this issue. Llamda also requested that Blizzard "inform all … system administrators that they are not to discipline any players for mentioning or discussing sexual orientation or gender identity in a non-insulting fashion" (Peckham 2006). Shortly after, Sams released a statement apologising to Andrews, and termed the actions of the Game Master (GM) who originally dealt with Andrews' case as an "unfortunate mistake". Stating further that "it has always been, and will remain Blizzard's policy that LGBT-friendly guild are allowed to announce their existence, and to recruit members in the same manner as any other guilds" (cited in Robustmcmanlypants.org 2006, unpaginated). Andrews was also informed that there would be further clarification of the language contained within the game policies in order to help avoid such confusion in the future. Yet, it is debateable as to whether this outcome eventuated because of the threat of legal action, or because of enlightened awareness on Blizzard's part.

Blizzard's admission of error in 2006 did not, however, have a significant impact on the culturally dominant discourse within online gaming, as homosexuality and uses of anti-gay language continue to be synonymous with things 'lesser than'. The homophobia that still exists in online gaming can too often become rampant, and gay gamers (aka. Gaymers) have little choice but to endure varying forms of harassment, from public commentary, to outright 'in your face' bigotry. Valentine (2007, 19) states that the identity of particular spaces are "produced and stabilized through the repetition of the intersectional identities of the dominant groups that occupy them … such that particular groups claim the right to these spaces". Furthermore, when non-conforming identities are "'done' differently in particular temporal moments they rub up against, and so expose, these dominant spatial orderings that define who is in place/out of place, who belongs and who does not" (Valentine 2007, 19) In Andrews' experience (and many other 'gaymers') WoW is not only produced but regulated and maintained as a heterosexual and homophobic space, where non-conforming 'queer' identities are marginalised and

oppressed. Andrews' enduring conflict and eventual win, however, shone a much needed spotlight on an issue that was, up until that point, being swept under the proverbial rug. As Jennings (2008, 105) says, Andrews' win was more of "an ideological victory for gay rights in the game:". Jennings (2008, 105) continues:

> The knowledge that there is a viable means of recourse for players who have an interest in projecting the ability of GLBT "friendly" players to enjoy the game – that those players are not totally marginalized is a result of Andrews and her sympathizer's ability to effectively navigate the lingual landscape and draw attention to their cause.

Blizzard is not the only game company to receive critical feedback concerning their management of sexual politics, both in-game and in the real-world. For example, several years ago Bio Ware censored the use of homosexual terms in their online forum for *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, which was hotly debated at the time. Also, the game designer Jacques Servin, who lost his job after he decided to include shirtless, Speedo-clad men ("himbos") with bright yellow nipples into the release of the game SimCopter, without prior approval (Fahey 2009). There is an obvious lack of portrayal of marginalised groups in online games, and Shaw (2012a, 28) argues that this is "often tied to the fact that the industry rarely recognises members of these groups as gamers". In an attempt to appeal to gamers who are pro same-gender romance (SGR), Bio Ware has begun to produce games that are inclusive of SGR, such as the Mass Effect series. Even more recently, however, in response to player demand, Bio Ware announced that they will be including SGR in the next expansion of Star Wars, titled "Rise of the Hutt Cartel". The following comment was posted by Bio Ware's Executive Producer Jeff Hickman (2013):

> First of all, I want to apologize that this is taking so long to get in the game. I realize that we promised SGR to you guys and that many of you believed that this would be with a companion

character. Unfortunately, this will take a lot more work than we realized at the time and it (like some other pieces of content we talked about earlier in the year) has been delayed as we focused on the changes required to take the game Free-to-Play. As we have said in the past, allowing same gender romance is something we are very supportive of.

Secondly, I want to reveal today that we are adding SGR with some NPCs [non-player characters] on Makeb [a planet] and do intend on pursuing more SGR options in the future. More details to come!

As Hickman's comment shows, there is hinting of further developments for SGR content in the new expansion. Yet, to begin with, the SGR content will only occur on one planet - Makeb. Pockets of resistance sprung up as news of this reached the public. While anti-SGR groups protested the inclusion altogether, pro SGR groups became concerned that SGR content would only be occurring on one planet, effectively quarantining SGR and anyone interested in SGR to one small section of the game. As a result, Bio Ware received much negative feedback and has been accused of marginalising and segregating non-heterosexual romance (Pearson 2013). Various media sources also started to refer to this latest expansion update as "The Gay Planet", or "The Gay Ghetto". While Bio Ware's efforts to be more inclusive of same-sex relationships are commendable, they have also received a lot of criticism for rushing their plans and not thinking through the implications of applying SGR content to one location. More recent updates, however, state that SGR will be occurring in several different areas of the game, not just on Makeb, and that all players will have a choice as to whether or not to engage with the game's various NPC's and their SGR storyline dialogues (torwars.com 2013). At present, there are no opportunities to connect with NPCs in WoW but some players are already engaging in online sex with other players, and I explore this further in the next chapter.

**Summary**

In this chapter I examined the ways in which gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW. Drawing on queer theory, I highlighted and discussed a diverse range of gaming experiences, and acknowledged the production of heterosexual space within digital gaming environments, as gaming culture is dominated by masculine, heterosexual (and often homophobic) discourse. There are a growing number of people who are observing and deconstructing the dominant positioning of heterosexuality, and this chapter contributes to the gap in geographical knowledge relating to the ways in which this is manifesting within online game environments. Over the past two decades geographers have made strides towards demonstrating space as a social construct with sexualized dimensions. In doing so, particular attention has been paid to the active production of heterosexualised space and how sexual 'others' live and experience space on a daily basis (Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Oswin 2008). In this chapter I have discussed several facets of online gaming, relationships and sexuality, such as gender-switching, gaming discourse, and the gendered appearance and performances of virtual bodies. Throughout each of these discussions one thing is clear – regardless of the game, most gamers are not critical of their options for avatar customisation, including the ways in which they are able to shape, mould and perform their avatar's gender, sexuality and physical appearance. Player choice has to be understood within wider discourses of structural inequalities and social relations (Lumpkin 2007). As such, both gay and straight gamers see the advantage in having more player choices. Not only has gaming become an incredibly social activity but continued advances in video game design have made it possible for gamers to experience those social connections in very real and emotional ways.

As is evidenced in Andrews' case, those who are 'othered' in online games often have a lot to contend with, yet, in many ways, these demonstrations of resistance have worked to strengthen and build the networks of minority communities. The design of online games continues to develop and in doing so, it opens up new avenues for exploring different kinds of identities, connections and interactions.

For example, it is possible to meet, socialise and develop intimate relationships with people who live in other countries, and where identities are lived and experienced primarily through their online avatars. Spaces are socially constructed and it is important to examine the ways in which certain spaces, such as online games serve as sites of resistance to inequality and authority (Del Casino 2009). Even in games like WoW, new communities are emerging all of the time (such as gay friendly guilds) that enable people to socialise and try out new sexual identities in a safe space with supportive peers, and which would otherwise be restricted by the limitations of real-spaces and real bodies (Johnston and Longhurst 2010). The current depth of player choice and avatar customization has allowed gamers to experiment and role-play with their own identities, in ways that would be impossible in their own lives. As in Lee and Hoadley's (2006) case, these experimentations often work to enhance other people's understandings of how sexed and gendered relations are influenced by real-world power relations. Marginalised groups such as gay gamers are finding ways to resist by making visible and 'playing around with' norms and expectations that influence what online game communities are, and what they could potentially become (Sundén 2009).

Yee (2014, 5) argues that at present "millions of people spend increasing amounts of time in online games and digital worlds, we need to be vigilant about whether these new environments are fulfilling their promises of freedom and reinvention, and if they're not, we need to find a way to change them." Changes are happening and developers are increasingly realizing the advantages (arguably from an economic and profit-driven point of view) of providing a continually expanding array of game-play and character options that enhance the diversity of games. As a result, more games are being developed that give player's additional freedom to shape and mould their online identities across a range of social categories, such as age, gender, sexuality, personality, race and much more. Whether or not this impacts upon the dominant status of heteronormative and masculinist discourse within gaming culture as a whole, however, is yet to be seen. At present the

majority of games continue to incorporate designs that encourage heteronormative discourse and as such, do very little to challenge the dominant status of heterosexuality. Therefore, it is important to consider how games are monitored and regulated, and also how gamers with marginalised identities are choosing to respond to these measures by forming their own supportive communities and networks. In this chapter I have also briefly discussed elements of online intimacy between players that emerge in games, a theme which I examine in more depth in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: Intimacy, love and romance in WoW

While WoW is a game based on warcraft and conquest, it also celebrates particular holiday events, such as Christmas and Easter. Also, every year around Valentine's Day, WoW holds a world event called "Love Is In The Air", where players can participate in specific quests centred around the idea of romance. In this chapter, I discuss aspects of friendship, distance, intimacy and weddings within WoW. In order to illustrate the ways in which gaming can be understood as an embodied *felt* experience, the examples presented in this chapter emphasise the 'realness' of these relationships through the emotions and affect experienced by participants. I look at what kinds of intimate and loving relationships gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond. First, I present a detailed and critical account of Jenny's (37, interviewee) story and how she meets her husband Paul in WoW. The example of Jenny and Paul highlights the complex ways in which online relationships can be understood as embodied and *felt* experiences. Second, geographical distance is often a serious consideration in most relationships and I look at the ways in which some participants successfully navigate this particular obstacle, while others do not. Third, this is followed by an examination of the ways in which couples meet in WoW and how they view their emotional connections with intimate partners, and where the online relationship then becomes an offline one. Finally, I discuss briefly the phenomenon of online weddings in relation to love and romance in WoW.

Of the total of 57 participants involved in this study, approximately half (27) decided to meet up with their online partner offline (face-to-face). Fourteen participants are currently in offline relationships with the people they met while gaming, and of these 14, six are married and another four are engaged to be married. A further six have children with their now offline partners, and nine plan to meet one day soon. Sixteen participants reported being in online relationships that have since ended, and another six provided information that confirmed that they had been involved in some form of cybercheating. This number, however,

may have been higher if the research questions put forward had included a specific query regarding issues of infidelity. Reflecting on geographies of emotion and affect, Shaw and Warf (2009, 2, emphasis in original) argue that video games as representations miss the way in which "these worlds *affect* users on an embodied, preconscious level". I adopt a similar view and in this chapter I highlight the ways in which video games can be understood as sensorial digital spaces which expose players to a complex array of affects. In this chapter I draw on participant data which demonstrates the level of intimacy being expressed by the gamers engaged in close and personal relationships while playing WoW, and which is characterised by the emotion of love, a sense of hyper-personal communication, as well as high levels of self-disclosure. In the following section I discuss Jenny's experience of online intimacy when she met her husband while playing in WoW.

**Falling in-love in WoW: Jenny and Paul's story**

Jenny was 32 years old when she first began gaming in WoW. At the time she lived at home with her husband in Arizona, USA. Thousands of miles away in NZ, Paul who was 24 years old, and had been playing WoW for a slightly longer period of time. He lived in Thames (a coastal town located in the Waikato region of the North Island, NZ) with his girlfriend of eight years. On the day that Jenny met Paul in-game, she was already 'questing' with two other players in WoW, however, their group needed help to complete a particularly difficult quest line, which is when they bumped into Paul. They asked Paul if he could join their group and help them complete the quest, which he did. At the time Jenny was quite new to the game but she recalls "hitting it off" with Paul straight away (Jenny, interviewee, July 2010).

After meeting Paul, Jenny could see that he had a good understanding of the game, as he readily answered all of her questions and was knowledgeable about the story lines associated with the quests that they were undertaking. From that first meeting, Jenny and Paul became members of the same guild and for the next two years they often spent time in each other's virtual company. Jenny explains

that Paul "was really the one that helped me learn about WoW", and "we just became amazing friends … and we got closer and closer and closer" (Jenny, interviewee, July 2010).



**Figure 5.1: Screenshot taken by Jenny of her orc avatar standing next to Paul's troll avatar. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

As their relationship grew, both Paul and Jenny confided in each other that they were not happy in their offline relationships. Jenny states, "after a while we realised that we *really* liked each other and we started flirting online and it escalated from there" (Jenny, interviewee, July 2010, emphasis added). As Paul and Jenny's relationship became more personal and intimate, so too did their forms of communication, which had begun to branch out into other online programs where they could speak to each other (e.g. Ventrilo voice chat) and see each other (e.g. Skype). Around this time, however, programs like Skype were either not available or just being introduced to internet users, therefore, basic webcams were the popular choice for talking to people 'live' via the internet (although communications were usually affected by varying 'lag' or time delays). Jenny explains that she had heard about some of the new ways that people were

beginning to use webcam applications such as webcam sex, so at first she did not like the idea of using a webcam for communicating with Paul. She explains:

> [We] went to Vent[rilo], and on the camera, the webcams. Although I was never really comfortable with the webcam thing, I was still sort of ... I thought that was sleazy. So I wasn't a big fan of that. We never did the webcam sex thing, ever. I was like … I'm not that confident of a person either. So we never did that but we did talk over Vent. Then I went to phone, and Skype. Skype was huge because it was free, and that sort of thing. It's funny because [in the beginning] he used to be like, "well if you're not wanting to go on the camera, it makes me question who you are". I was like, "listen, I'll have a regular conversation with you on webcam all day but I won't go *there* on the webcam. I'm sorry, I just won't do it".[46]
>
> (Jenny, interviewee, June 2010, emphasis in original)

As Jenny's comment illustrates, she was uncomfortable with the thought of moving her relationship with Paul onto a platform of communication that she thought of as 'sleazy' and did not entirely trust. The more I spoke to Jenny, the more it became obvious that she felt that her relationship with Paul was special and she did not want to do anything that she felt would compromise the honesty and integrity of their relationship. Therefore, at this stage in their relationship, Jenny and Paul did not yet know what each other looked like offline, and it was not until several months later, and the introduction of Skype with video as a new way of communicating online, that they saw each other for the first time. Jenny's experience of becoming increasingly intimate with Paul while she was still married and living with her husband (and where one of her main concerns was the preservation of honesty and integrity in her relationship with Paul), is one that is shared by people in similar situations. Gilbert *et al.* (2011), for example,

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[46] Jenny's statement of "won't go there" is meant as a euphemism for "won't have webcam sex".

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point out that people who fall in love in online environments tend to view their online relationships as significantly better than their 'real-life' relationships.[47] As such, they tend to be more truthful and place more emphasis on the ways in which words and meanings are formed.

As Jenny and Paul's relationship progressed, so too did their feelings for one another, which they were beginning to freely express. One of the main methods they used for communicating their feelings involved WoW's in-game mail feature, where they often sent each other love letters. Jenny explained that she enjoyed logging into the game at the beginning of each day because she knew that there would be a letter in her mailbox from Paul. She would reply to his letters so that he could read her responses when he next logged in. In a letter to Paul, Jenny writes:

> I don't know where or when it happened but you've got me. Your name runs through my mind like one of those digital banners streaming a name across its surface over and over. Your voice seeps into the deepest core of my sensibilities … I hear it and instantly I am all aflutter, all flirts and shy smiles.
> /kiss
>
> (Letter from Jenny to Paul, sent via WoW's in-game mail, n.d.)

Jenny and Paul eventually professed their love for one another, and as the end of Jenny's letter suggests, her relationship with Paul also become cybersexual. Although they had never met offline, their friendship and the intensity of their intimate relationship gave Paul and Jenny the strength to leave their respective offline partners and commit solely to each other. Leaving their offline partners, however, was not an easy decision for either of them to make. In a letter to Jenny, Paul writes:

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[47] I discuss aspects of cybercheating in further detail in Chapter 6.

I chose not to say "please don't leave" [log out] because I understand you have to go.

It was hard, but I chose not to echo your expressed feelings when you left tonight because I didn't want you to think I was parroting back to you like I had to.

I have trouble sometimes saying these things so when I choose to, I want them to freakin' mean something. Everything.

We chose to do Baron,[48] even though we were burning to fuck each other.

I've made my choice. I want you.

(Letter from Paul to Jenny, sent via WoW's in-game mail, n.d.).

When not working or sleeping, Jenny and Paul spent most of their spare time together in WoW, and discussed numerous points of interests, including living together and one day having a family. As Paul stated in his earlier comment, he had made his choice, and although he had never travelled overseas before, he made the decision to sell everything and move to the U.S. to be with Jenny. During my discussion with Jenny, I asked her to tell me about the first time they ever saw each other offline. She says:

I went to go and pick him up at the airport. I was just so nervous. Oh my god I was so nervous and giddy! At 34 [years old] I felt like a school girl again. I knew what he looked like but I had never met him. So I'm looking for him and he comes out and I have this totally goofy grin on my face and the poor thing is green, literally green and I was like "oh my god, are you okay?" He was like, "I will be, as soon as we get home". Then we just hugged, you know, soooo tightly, like I haven't hugged someone ever. We only kissed

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[48] Baron refers to Baron Rivendare, a boss in one of the earlier instances, where a group of players defeat the boss for loot.

each other on the cheek because I think we were both too nervous, and then we drove home and we were talking non-stop all the way. By the time we got home he felt so much better because I'd distracted him, and then that night we completely fell on each other.

<div style="text-align: right">(Jenny, interviewee, June 2010)</div>

For the next year Jenny and Paul lived together in the U.S. and Jenny became pregnant. During my conversation with Jenny she said that she was surprised that they did not become pregnant sooner because prior to Paul's arrival in the U.S. they had decided that they would not be using any form of birth control. As Jenny says, "if we got pregnant, good for us". For them to have already decided on whether or not they were going to have children together before they had already even met offline highlights just how personal and intimate their online relationship had become over those two years. Both Jenny and Paul decided that NZ would be the best place to raise a child, so when Jenny was approximately six months pregnant she sold her home and they both moved to NZ. Also, during our discussion, I asked Jenny how her online relationship with Paul compared to the offline relationships that she has previously experienced. She comments:

> You can't touch, you can't hug, and you don't have your first kiss.
> It's all done virtually but it's all so much more intense because all
> you have is those words. So each word you make is a touch. And
> the thing that makes it so intense is that you are imagining it. I still
> have all of the notes we would write. You know, I would wake up
> in the morning and I would go into my mailbox in WoW and I
> would see a letter from him, or a poem, or something, and I would
> write him something. And it was just this really, really crazy
> intense thing. The three weeks before he got to the States I thought
> I was going to go out of my mind waiting for him. It was the most

intense relationship I've ever had. Hands down, it was the virtual

one.

<div align="right">(Jenny, interviewee, June 2010)</div>

Several years later, Jenny and Paul are still together and continue to reside in NZ. They are now married and running a successful Net café, while raising their son. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 5) argues that "participants in cyberlove take the reality of cyberspace seriously ... they cannot actually kiss each other, but nevertheless the kiss they may send is emotionally vivid and its emotional impact is often similar to that of an actual kiss". As with Jenny and Paul's relationship, the points that Ben-Ze'ev makes are valid in many other online relationships experienced by numerous participants involved in this study.

Despite the fact that Jenny and Paul's relationship was physically remote for two years, the connection and level of emotion that they experienced online was, according to Jenny more intensely *felt* than any other offline relationship she had ever been in. Various theorists have discussed aspects of online relationships and different forms of technology that are used for communication. One thing that is typically agreed upon is how communication in online environments work to enhance non-physical attributes between two people, such as their rapport with one another and the overall level of mutual self-disclosure, which in turn promote erotic connections stemming from emotional intimacy, rather than physical attraction (Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Cooper and Sportolari 1997). Also, it is common for the people experiencing these online relationships to view their conversations with each other as deeper and more personal than they would normally experience with offline partners. This in-depth level of conversation goes on to play an important role in the overall development of online relationships (Baker 2005; Ben-Ze'ev 2004). It is important to note that many theorists tend to write about online romance with a narrow focus on positive or negative experiences, rather than looking at them as individual and unique encounters, which vary

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across a wide range of subjective experiences[49] (see Table 1: Overview of Participants, Chapter 3). For example, Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) point out that various researchers describe or categorise online relationships differently and typically along the following lines:

> (a) highly impersonal and shallow due to the restricted nature of the medium (Parks and Floyd 1996); (b) interpersonal, but more restrictive than face-to-face relationships so that they take longer to form and to develop (Lea and Spears 1995); or (c) accelerated, and so intense that individuals self-disclose rapidly and form deeply intimate bonds in a short time frame (Walther 1996) (Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer 2007, 212).

Wildermuth and Bogl-Bauer (2007, 212) problematise these categories, noting that they place emphasis on the "physical context of the internet as a medium of communication", and as such this "diminishes the role relationship participants play in the equation". While this is a valid observation, the above observations are conducted primarily via ideas about communication and therefore, do not provide as in-depth a critique of the topic as might otherwise be provided via feminist research. Butler's (1990; 1993) theory, for example, would problematise these categories further in relation to performances of sex and gender within the given contexts. In the remainder of this chapter I examine these issues further and highlight various participants' experiences of online relationships, reflecting on how participants understand and interpret their intimate online relationships, while simultaneously experiencing varying levels of interpersonal communication within a single relationship.

In order to emphasise the 'realness' of relationships, feelings and emotions that originate within online interactions, I began this chapter by telling Jenny and

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[49] In order to highlight this aspect of my research, I have made a point of providing participants' ages, occupations and countries of residence alongside each of the quotes illustrated.

Paul's story, and the journey they found themselves on, from becoming friends and intimate partners, to leaving their offline partners and taking their online relationship into the real-world. Their story is important because it highlights various points that are common throughout many other online relationships, such as the role of friendship, as well as the emotions and *felt* experiences that gamers become involved in. Morrison *et al.* (2013, 513) argue that "discursive spaces, including spaces of information communication technologies, are not separate or disconnected from the 'real' world" and "understanding more about how love is an affective bond between people and through technological interfaces such as the internet and cell phones is therefore important" (Morrison *et al.* 2013, 513). For instance, gamers such as Jenny and Paul, who become involved in online intimate relationships, must contend with the realities associated with living so far apart, such as the lack of physicality in their relationship and the time differences between countries. In the following section, I explore interview transcripts from several other participants involved in this study and I discuss various aspects of gaming and online relationships, particularly in relation to common barriers or obstacles that people in online relationships have to cope with.

**Distance and online relationships**

Online games have become a part of the rapidly expanding system of networks (collectively known as the internet) that links millions of people together in new spaces, and which is changing the way people think, the nature of sexuality, the form of communities, and people's very identities (Turkle 1999, 643). Turkle highlights how involvement with online space affects the ways in which people view not only themselves but also personal relationships and communities. Online worlds, such as MMORPGs, offer gamers the chance to meet and interact with other people they might never have met offline. Often these online relationships cross traditional boundaries of age, race, and sexuality. Take, for example, Tina, a 36 year old accountant from Canada, who talks about the progression of her online

relationship with a man who was in fact much younger than she was initially led to believe:

> I met a level 32 warrior a couple of months after starting to play WoW. He was smart, brash and a skilled player. I was still a noob [new player]. We played together for many months. A lot of RP [role play]. To me the relationship we role played felt very real. And the feelings I had were real. A year passed, by now I was hopelessly in love. But everything was still in RP mode. I knew very little about him irl [in real life]. One day I admitted I was in love with him for real, and was there a chance we could bring the relationship further. He said NO! He was 25, I was 32 [and] he said the age difference was too much. I was shocked to say the least. A few more months pass, I'm in love, deeply with this [same] man I know nothing about and finally he admits he loves me too. We move on to Vent[rilo] (voice chat). I find out he lives in England, near London. I lived in Switzerland (though am American). At this point, we'd known each other almost two years, we played wow for hours every day. We had a full intimate relationship (yeah I know but believe it or not cyber sex can be very satisfying). But he still held back. So I did something crazy. I quit my job ([which was] on the rocks anyway due to increased wow, lol) and moved to London. I had very little money, was unsure exactly where he was and had no job or even place to live. I didn't even know his full name. I get here, log into wow and tell him, I am here, I am broke, I am at the YMCA and will be homeless within two weeks, come and get me! He says he has something to tell me, [which is that] we can't be together even though he loves me, and of course, I at that moment, thought he was married and I was screwed! But, it turns out the reason wasn't that, he was married, but that he was only 17 and still lived at home [with his parents]. Oh shit. Well, to make a

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long story short, I didn't care [about] his age, we met up. I will never forget that first kiss. We were inseparable after that kiss and have been together ever since. It has been 6 years now and we are still as in love as we were. We do play wow together still, though it is not as integral in our lives as it once was. I was lucky in that his family accepted and loved me from the beginning or the age difference may have been much more of an issue. As it is, he is my peer and equal in every way and the fact that he is only 22 and I am almost 38 means absolutely nothing (other than he has more stam[ina] than me, lol).

<div align="right">(Tina, online participant, Canada, 2010)</div>

From Tina's comment, it is evident that her online lover was actually 15 when they began their relationship, given that he was 17 when she discovered his real age, two years later. Also, it is important to note that for two years, not only did Tina become emotionally and intimately involved in a strictly online relationship but she did so with someone who lived a great distance away, and who represented their self in a manner that was not true to their offline identity. This last point is interesting because in comparison to all other participants, Tina's experience is unique, as she is the only person to report falling in love with someone who has falsely portrayed their real identity. Digital geographies are known for blurring the lines between rigid binaries, and also for examining the spatiality of the internet (Shaw and Warf 2009). In this sense, game space becomes an emotional and affective landscape for online relationships. This particular example of Tina and her partner highlights just how open and accommodating long-distance online relationships can be of factors such as age difference, which in a developing relationship may typically act as an obstacle and social barrier in the 'real' world. Although it is not the aim of this research, it is important to note that this particular area is gaining the attention of scholars who are interested in examining similar issues related to cyber crimes, such as online dating scams

(Rege 2009), and the role that emotion and affect play in these relationships (Buchanan and Whitty 2013). Will (online questionnaire, USA) comments:

> [I met her while] questing in Felwood. [She was a] female Belf [blood elf] and [I a] male Troll (both hunters) ... [We both have a] similar playstyle ... serious towards our goals but never forgetting to have fun (it is a game after all!). In watching her interact with others and overcome the challenges that the game presents, it became clear we had much in common. I thought about 'her' afterwards (fully aware in the beginning that she might be a male posing as a female) and recounted the times where we both would do something or say something without the normal extra effort needed when questing with someone you just met. The teamwork part just seemed to 'click'. The next day I sent her an in-game mail thanking her for the fun couple of hours that we'd spent together ... it progressed rapidly from there ;-)  We continued to quest and started to lightly flirt and after a few weeks I asked if she used any IM [instant messaging] programs that she might be comfortable with giving me her nick [name]. She did, and we found our chats at work to be as much fun as playing WoW each night. Eventually we progressed to voice chat and I fell in love with her voice as much as her texting. Webcamming followed within a month and we still to this day (and night) always have Skype up on a separate monitor as soon as both of us are home. [We met for the first time when] I flew back to Atlanta. Spent 4 days there ... it was simply grand. We've continued on from that point. Started a guild together, recruited many other wonderful people and still play WoW most every night. She has moved closer (Utah) and recently we've signed a lease together on a house that I'm living in and within 4 months she will be moving out here for good. =) Been a long 2+ years of waiting and wondering for the both of us how we

could make things work, WoW was key to our relationship in the beginning and still brings us joy each time we play it. We both look back to that day in Felwood as a very lucky moment (Ironically we had both called in sick to work that day). I remember hesitating a long moment before accepting her offer to group, I always preferred to quest alone, but for some reason I clicked 'yes' and away we went. Later I found out she only invited me because I kept stealing her mobs! =)[50]

<div align="right">(Will, online participant, USA, 2011)</div>

As the above comment shows, many of the participants involved in this study, who have fallen in love, or made emotionally intense connections have either already met their online partners in person, or have made plans to meet them in the near future. Valentine (2006, 367) points out that "intimacy is usually assumed to require physical proximity ... yet distance does not necessarily bring intimacy to an end". Rather, the internet is being utilised by people to maintain intimate relationships over long distances, and as such, it has created a new space in which to examine intimacies. Similarly, Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 27-28) states:

Physical distance becomes irrelevant in cyberspace; some people even speak about the death of (physical) distance. Although each person uses the Internet from different locales, while they are in cyberspace they are actually in the same space. Online personal relationships are immediate in a temporal sense – two lovers can communicate with no significant time delay … Despite the spatial separation, everything is close in cyberspace; everywhere is just a typing distance away … Although your lover may be 3,000 miles away, it feels to you as if he or she is just next door, or even inside the room.

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[50] A mob refers to one or more non-player characters (NPCs) whose primary purpose is to be killed for experience, quest objectives, or loot.

Ben-Ze'ev's statement is relevant to the majority of the participants involved in this study across a range of scales. For example, while most utilised their online gaming space to maintain their relationships and feel closer to their online partners, there were also several others who ended their online relationships due to the geographical distance between them. For example, Max, a 24 year old tradesperson residing in NZ tells how he met, fell in love, and then ended his relationship with another gamer:

> I meet this person thru the guild I was in at the time … Me in New Zealand, her USA. Her voice combined with the accent was enchanting, coupled with her fun loving personality. I was completely taken. We spent a lot of time messaging/emoting one another in raids and/or just hanging around Dalaran. We levelled alts[51] together and spent most moments doing something together in game. If we didn't play WoW it would be because we are on the phone chatting. We never met in real-life. The reality of being so far apart and in need of some physical contact ultimately became too frustrating to overcome and we ended things on average terms. Friends we remain to this day as I personally value her company if and when we get an opportunity to chat. Maybe under different circumstances it could of continued but at the end of the day neither of us had the funds to relocate to continue the relationship.
>
> (Max, online participant, NZ, 2011)

Max's frustration of not being able to meet his online partner is something that was commonly experienced by all of the participants in this study, even for those who eventually met their online partners offline. Others drew a line between 'real' and 'virtual' when talking about their experiences of online relationships. For

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[51] Gamers typically have several different virtual characters or avatars, and they are often simply referred to as 'alts', meaning alternative characters.

example, some did not consider their online relationships to be 'real' until they actually met their online partners in the flesh, as the following comment by Tim, a 28 year old IT technician living in NZ demonstrates:

> Tim: [We both lived in] New Zealand … She was funny and a good distraction from what was boring raiding [and] we played Chess via an add-on in game.
>
> Cherie: How did your relationship progress? Did you go on to do any other private messaging, or webcaming?
>
> Tim: Not before meeting.
>
> Cherie: Did you meet in real-life?
>
> Tim: Yes, that's how it became a relationship. I don't see the point in internet love without the form of becoming something real. Honestly I'd never even thought of it as anything more than friends before we met. She happened to be driving through my city one night and we met up for coffee and it was a hit off in person even more so than friends in game.
>
> (Tim, online participant, NZ, 2011)

Kitchin (1998, 397) points out that "while some virtual communities seem to have rules and protocols very similar to real communities, they do not possess the same kinds of responsibility". Similarly, Tim's view of his online relationship allowed for a less engaging form of interaction, where he as the user could disconnect "with little or no consequence" (Kitchin 1998, 397). Before meeting offline, she and Tim relied solely upon the gaming interface to communicate their feelings for one another. While Tim did not consider their relationship to be 'real' until meeting for the first time, it does not alter the fact that the spaces of online communication technologies are not separate from users' felt experiences and their own offline environments. In Tim's case, they were able to communicate and express their feelings for one another and establish enough of an emotional connection to warrant meeting in the first place. Andrea, an 18 year old student

from the US, describes how she met and fell in love with another online gamer but later broke-up with him due to issues around relationship insecurity, distance as an obstacle, and jealousy:

> We were always in game playing together. I'm not exactly sure when I started getting feelings for him. He told me he loved me one night before logging off [and] I said it back, and I knew I meant it. We talked over vent, steam, and eventually Skype, and a few months later, over webcam ... [He] would get really jealous [and] he was very controlling after a while … He didn't like that I had a lot of male friends. I had ended our relationship after ten months of being a couple, because he kept delaying when he was going to come see me, and we'd always fight about that and both of our jealousy became out of control. After this, he'd try and convince me we should be together … We had stopped talking completely for months. Now we talk again, but not much.
>
> (Andrea, online participant, USA, 2012)

Kitchin (1998) discusses how it is possible for internet users to enter online arguments where there is no fear of physical reprisal. This last point may be true for the majority of users, yet there have been several documented cases that prove otherwise. Take, for example, the case of a British gamer in 2008, who was killed in real-life by another gamer who he had previously won against in an online game called Advance Wars (Jones 2008). Also, in 2010 another incident took place when a gamer in France went offline to "hunt down" and stab a rival player who had killed his character in the online game Counter-Strike (*Telegraph* 2010). Kinsley (2013b, 550) correctly asserts that there is a problematic tendency for researchers examining online environments to lean "towards normative splits between 'the real' and 'the virtual', online and offline, which hide the material bases of contemporary sociotechnical forms of life". Kinsley (2013a) also argues that greater attention needs to be paid to the ways in which material conditions are a part of

the digital. The examples above are rare occurrences, however, highlighting these examples, as well as the gaming experiences of participants involved in this study aides in emphasising one of the main findings of this research, which is that emotions such as love, anger, and heartbreak are a very real part of online gaming experiences. The following section emphasises this point, as it reflects on the role of distance in online relationships and the ways in which it affects many online couples.

**Intimate relationships formed while playing WoW**

Within this study, approximately one-third of research participants reported ending their online relationships, with the most common reason being that they were unable to meet each other offline. For example, John's relationship with Pamela did not last due to the fact that they could not find a way to be together in the real-world. John is a 23 year old student living in NZ. He explains:

> For awhile we discussed how realistic it would be to pursue a relationship. We were a LONG way away, and it was hard to imagine if that would ever change, beyond just crossing our fingers. It ultimately came down to "I would rather have you without being able to be there than not have you at all". So there it was – we were together.
>
> (John, online participant, NZ, 2010)

John went on to discuss how afterwards their relationship stayed fairly similar from February to December, stating that "there really aren't a lot of options when you live that far away from one another". Being in different countries also made it more difficult, as John worked early hours, which meant that by the time he logged onto the game it was to spend more time with Pamela it was usually around 10-11pm on her time, "which was… limiting." By the end of December, John eventually managed to make a trip and visited her for three weeks:

We kept it short because I think we were both worried that it could be terrible somehow, but it was great. Except, obviously, I had to come home. We immediately planned another trip, but because of money and work commitments, that wouldn't be until the end of the next year. It was really, really hard for awhile there. After I got back, I also started up university.

(John, online participant, NZ, 2010)

Because of John's new study schedule he could no longer make most of the raid times organised by the guild, and that was when he began to experience relationship difficulties with Pamela. He explains:

Because of my new schedule, I could no longer raid … occasionally I'd bicker with [Pamela] because she needed to do raiding-related stuff, while I couldn't. We didn't have a lot of time to 'spend' together, so it was frustrating when the game actually got in the way of us. I visited at the end of that year, for 3 months this time. Again, it was great. We were happy pretty much the entire time … coming back to NZ after 3 months was hard, really, really hard. I was depressed, and starting to question if I could do it anymore. It was looking like it would take me at least 3 more years to finish university, and it wasn't feasible for her to move here. We talked a lot about it, and eventually agreed that it was just too much. We decided to break up.

(John, online participant, NZ, 2010)

At this point, John and Pamela's relationship had gone through a series of different stages, where they began as acquaintances and progressed through to an intimately involved couple. John also reflects further upon how their relationship ended and talks about how Pamela managed to move on to another relationship quite quickly, stating:

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I guess it's sort of ironic that it wasn't until it had been awesome that we realised we couldn't do it. It was a mutual decision, and neither of us were really happy about it. She bounced pretty quickly into another relationship, again with someone from the guild. I don't really have much to say about that, except that I found it difficult to deal with. She still plays WoW, is in the same guild, etc. and we're still 'friends'. Though we don't talk a lot. Every few months I'll come back to WoW and say hi, catch up on things etc. We're not as close as I think we'd both believed we would be, but I guess that's the way it goes.

(John, online participant, NZ, 2010)

Similar to John, another participant named Jordan told me of how she met Harry in-game in WoW shortly after it was released as a new MMORPG. Jordan is a 29 year old sole parent of two sons. She lives in NZ, and Harry is a 26 year old man who lives in the USA. On this particular day, Jordan was playing as a level 8 troll priest avatar when she came across Harry, also a troll of around the same level, who happened to be watching an area with a boss that he could not kill by himself. Jordan approached Harry and asked him if he would like help and he happily accepted her offer. Jordan explains:

So we killed [the boss] and that's how it started. He ended up joining my guild and he was always thanking me for helping him because no one else had even talked to him and that was his first real turn on WoW, and we went from there. That was when I was staying up all night playing with him because he was in America. I'd play until 8am, get the kids off to school and then go to bed.

(Jordan, interviewee, NZ, 2010)

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At the time Harry was recovering from a back injury and spent a lot time in-game with Jordan. According to Jordan, their relationship developed quickly, as they spent most of their waking hours together, and when they were not playing in-game, they were on MSN video chatting:

> Jordon: It was, it was getting full on, you know, we'd have some naughty conversations with the video, you know that sort of thing (laughs). It did get pretty serious. Like he wanted to come here and I wanted him to come here but he couldn't afford to come here. And you know, we talked about things like that. And because at the same time [Bill and Ange, two of our gaming friends] had gotten together and then Bill [who lives in NZ] actually went to America and I was like 'oohhh I wish I could've gone with you!' Yeah but in the end, Harry sort of stopped playing and it just sort of petered out [ended]. So for a time it got really intense, but after a while we just went back to being friends because I think we both eventually realised nothing was going to come of it.
>
> Cherie: So if it hadn't been for the distance do you think you would have met?
>
> Jordan: Yeah we definitely would have met and who knows what would have come out of that.
>
> (Jordan, interviewee, NZ, 2010)

Baker (2002) states that most online relationships must overcome several obstacles in order to become successful, and a major obstacle in the majority of online relationships is physical distance. Jordan went on to say that she eventually met someone else and the last time she saw Harry was on MySpace, where she discovered that he had also met someone new and had a child with them. Similar to some of the other couples discussed in this chapter, Jordan and Harry were not able to meet each other in person and it was this factor which impacted the most

upon the outcome of their relationship. Connor, a 29 year old electrician living in the USA, also describes his experience of being in an online long-distance relationship:

> I met the person playing WoW ... Both of us lived in the USA. What I found attractive about her was her intelligence. We first started making small talk while questing. It led to her being added to my friends list and running [teaming up] with her all the time. After discovering we both felt a mutual connection we decided to talk on the phone. That led to almost a nightly phone call. We had plans to meet for vacation but never got around to it because I live on the East coast and she lived on the West coast. When the plans for meeting up fell through we sorta started slipping away from each other. Not too long after she quit playing I called her a couple of times but in the end we just stopped talking to each other. We no longer talk to each other. I attribute this to the distance between us.
>
> (Connor, online participant, USA, 2011)

Even though there may be a vast geographical distance between two people who fall in love over the internet, Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 188) argues that "in online relationships, intimacy is high – probably higher than in offline relationships. Intimacy has to do with self-disclosure, and this is significantly present in online relationships". Another participant, for example, states:

> Well my ex girlfriend and I were together for about 4 years, she lived in Canada and I in the USA. The distance is what killed it for us. But I fell in love with her and gaming was the ['friend'] who introduced us.
>
> (Rex, online participant, USA, 2011)

Yet, some couples manage to stay together regardless of the time or distance between them. Take, for example, Dan, an Australian 22 year old analyst programmer. Dan is involved in an online relationship for more than five years and he is planning to one-day marry his online partner Jayne who resides in Jakarta:

> We started in 2007 and [it has] progressed a lot since then. [We have] met three times, message everyday through blackberry chat and do Skype webcam whenever we can. [When I first] let her know that I had developed some feelings and enjoyed her company, [and] she let me know she had developed some of her own. My first trip to Jakarta was [in] September 2008, and what a trip that was. We went to places like SeaWorld and went out for dinner most nights I was there; it was great, time of my life. This is the part where she was diagnosed with cancer. It was a very emotional time for both of us as you can imagine. She wanted to have a baby while I was there, but I didn't want to go through that while we were apart. The doctor told her that she must have chemo [therapy] as soon as she can before it spreads, but she really wanted a baby. She went to the donor bank and did just that, on Boxing Day 2008 she told me she was pregnant. I didn't really know what to say, but I knew I loved her so I helped her through it. She gave birth to a healthy baby boy [in] June 2009. Although I'm not the father I promised I would look after [him] (she used my name as his middle name). [We are] still in a relationship, she's applying for a visa now, when she comes over we'll get married and finally be together.
>
> (Dan, follow up email questionnaire, AUS, 2011)

Dan also explained that over the last two years they have not been able to see one another, however, Jayne has responded well to her chemotherapy sessions and is

just waiting for her visa to come through so that she and her son can travel and spend some time with him in Australia. Although contained within a brief summary, it is obvious that Dan's experiences of love online have been as both complex and difficult, but also enjoyable. As this section demonstrates, there are many ways in which online relationships can thrive and successfully negotiate obstacles, such as distance, illness, and cultural differences.

Online relationships are typically associated with online dating websites and much research focuses on this phenomenon. Therefore, when discussing online relationships, even those between gamers, it is important to consider various aspects of this work. For example, Frost *et al.* (2008) examine the ways in which internet website services providing online dating assistance frequently failed to meet user expectations. They argued that online dating sites would benefit from the incorporation of digital dates, where potential dating partners would experience a first date that was held within an online environment analogous to an offline date. Frost *et al.* (2008 59) state that when compared to face-to-face meetings, "virtual dates may permit some distortion", however, when compared to "standard online dating, they permit much less". In other words, the standard method of getting to know a potential date via the website chat channel was seen to be less effective. Their participants felt that the digital dates provided a more detailed and involved way of getting to know their dating partners, and whether or not they would be a match offline. The results of Frost *et al's* (2008 59) study showed that "participants' reactions were more positive toward individuals whom they had virtual dated than toward those whose profiles they had seen, effects that carried forward through an initial face-to-face meeting in a speed date". Consequently, participants' experiences of digital dating worked to enhance the level of social connectedness that they felt with their respective dates, which also improved the outcome of their first offline date.

The similarities between dating websites and meeting a person in-game are also realised by gamers themselves. Take, for example, Xavier's (23 year old registrar living in the UK) comment:

> [We] met during raids in Wrath of the Lich King [second WoW expansion]. I was playing a priest, she was playing a mage. [We] both live in the United Kingdom. She had a great sense of humour, just really friendly. We started talking in whispers, moved on to text messaging. Now we talk on the phone every day. We have not yet met in real life, we plan to though. People often have a negative view on dating on an internet based game, I personally see no difference from signing up for an online dating website.
>
> (Xavier, online participant, UK, 2011)

Xavier likens digital game-based relationships to online dating sites, which demonstrates that digital game environments, communities and cultures can be affective tools in assisting players with finding suitable love matches. Rex (a participant mentioned earlier in this chapter) also alludes to how gaming was the common denominator in forging his online attraction and subsequent relationship with another gamer, when he states, "I fell in love with her and gaming [WoW] was the say 'friend' who introduced us" (Rex, online questionnaire, September 2011). It is important to note, however, that there are some important differences between online games and dating websites. The main difference is that online dating websites are established for the express purpose of helping people find intimate partners based primarily on their appearance, whereas, MMORPGs are designed first and foremost as gaming interfaces, and to assist players in achieving certain quest objectives and reaching specific goals as they game. Yet, socialisation is an evitable part of online gaming and one of the significant findings of this research is that intimate partners in online gaming spaces tend to find one another primarily through the friendships they forge while playing the game.

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Clearly, relationships that begin in online spaces do not develop based on physical attraction. This is not to say that physical attraction does not play a part in online attractiveness because for many, the imagined physicality of another individual can play a crucial role in the development of any relationship. Key questions put to all of the participants in this study include: how did you meet? What attracted you to this person? What countries were you living in? And, how did your relationship progress? The following answer was provided by Maria, a 35 year old social worker living in Austria, who met her current partner in WoW:

> I played a female Night Elf Druid, he played a male Night Elf Hunter. I was questing on my own in an area that was a little too high level for me when I met a group of players. I said hi, they greeted me back and the hunter started whistling at me and dancing around me. I asked if I could join them to quest together and a few days later was asked to join the guild they were in. My first thought was that this hunter was a funny guy. He intrigued me from the start. The next day we planned to go to the Dead Mines [dungeon] but he could not join. I remember feeling a bit disappointed that he couldn't. I also remember feeling happy when he whispered me later that evening to say hello and chat with me. We planned a new Dead Mines mission, this time he joined. After that we quested together on a daily basis. We asked each other questions about real life, which became more personal as time progressed. At some point we decided to mail each other. By then we were both already more than interested in one another. Then calling each other followed, writing letters and a blind date in Vienna - Austria - where he lived. I lived in the Netherlands. We agreed on not sending pictures in advance to see if the chemistry would really be there when we would see each other for the first time at the airport. It was there, and it is still there :) We have been living together for almost 6 years

now. One month ago our baby girl was born and we plan to get married next year. We are still crazy in love and feel that we belong together :)

<div align="right">(Maria, online participant, Austria, 2011)</div>

What is interesting about Maria's comment is that apart from knowing his voice from their phone conversations, all Maria knew was that they shared an online attraction and enjoyed one another's company while they were in-game. As a result, she considers the possibility that there might be no physical attraction between them when they met for the first time offline. Fortunately for Maria her meeting was a good one. Most people, however, prefer to know what someone looks like before they meet.

As stated by Kinsley (2013b, 546), "the internet can be a relatively anonymous medium for social interaction", and some "people may feel free to perform their identities in different ways or attempt to perform an alternate or different identity for various reasons". Evidence of this can be seen with gamers whose online personas do not mirror their offline personalities. For example, the following comment was made by Sandra, a 28 year old sales advisor living in the UK, who was surprised after meeting one of her fellow guild members for the first time offline:

> It started with both of us being members of the same guild for over a year and getting to know each other that way, though not very closely. I played a female troll priest … and he was initially playing a male undead rogue … We were just loose acquaintances, and I was actually already in a relationship and not looking for romance at all. I was living in my home country of Austria, and my WoW partner-to-be was living in the UK - as was my then-boyfriend. One day someone in the guild suggested a guild meet-up in London and since I was already staying in the UK at the time I

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attended. This is where I met Mr Undead Rogue in person for the first time and I was instantly smitten. Judging from his behaviour online I had always imagined him as very grumpy, but he acted in a very charming manner towards me and looked very geeky, which appealed to me since I'm quite a geek myself.

(Sandra, online participant, Austria, 2011)

Sandra goes on to explain that although their meeting only lasted a few hours, the encounter remained very memorable. And over the course of the next few weeks they continued to develop their friendship in-game and ended up confessing their mutual attraction for each other. Sandra went on to say:

I ended my existing long-distance relationship. We ended up talking on instant messenger on a daily basis as well as using webcams and microphones. We also arranged more offline meetings over the course of the next couple of months. A little over a year after we first met in person, I moved over the UK. We've now been together for over three years, have been living together for nearly two, and our relationship is still going strong.

(Sandra, online participant, Austria, 2011)

Contrary to Sandra's experience, the relationships experienced by the majority of participants in this research evolved out of their in-game friendships. Intimate relationships that evolve out of friendships are a significant difference between online dating websites and online gamer couples. Creating friendships while gaming is a common occurrence in WoW, and as such, the intimate relationships experienced by gamers usually share these similarities, which can sometimes span several years. Matt and Regina (whose relationship I discussed in more detail later in this chapter) are one such couple. They knew of each other and were members of the same guild for more than a year before their relationship grew intimate. Regina and Matt explain:

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Regina: I mean, obviously as friends we weren't in love with each other, you know, per se. But for me, it's sort of just a love that started out as … that you love your best friend because they are an awesome person, and it just sort of grew into being in love.

Matt: We knew of each other for a long, long time before we became friends. But from the point where we *really* started talking, I don't know, it wouldn't have been more than about four months.

(Matt and Regina, interviewees, NZ, 2010, emphasis in original)

During our interview, Matt and Regina recalled how their friendship had progressed and how much they had enjoyed just 'hanging-out' with each other because they felt that they just 'clicked'. It was during these times when they discovered that their similar likes and dislikes were aligned. This was a factor for all participants who noted that it was during the 'friendship' phase of their relationships that they tended to share their mutual 'likes' and 'dislikes', and realised what they had, or did not have in common with their online partners. For example, Anthony, a 24 year old engineer living in the USA, comments:

[We] met in the same guild. She was healing lead (female blood elf). I was a resto druid (male tauren, at the time -- changed to female a few months after). We both live in the US (She in Seattle, I near Washington DC). We're both very like minded people. We enjoy the same things and dislike the same things. It [the relationship] progressed into private messaging via MSN and later to creating a private Ventrilo server where just the two of us could talk without any distractions or interruptions. We're moving in together in May. We've been "e-dating" for the past 3 months.

(Anthony, online participant, USA, 2011)

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As mentioned earlier, socialisation is a significant element in contemporary online games, and due to the degree of social activity that occurs, gamers no longer conform to the old stereotype, which traditionally depicts them as isolated and alone. Rather, online games can be utilised as a significant avenue for increasing one's social network. Kathryn, a 33 year old technical writer from the UK explains:

> I have made many friends in the game who have become my friends in real life and are now friends with on Facebook. I have been comfortable enough to confide in them and they often are the only people who can make me feel better when something bothers me or has made me feel bad in real life. I have about 4-5 very close friends I have made in WoW who are now my real life friends.
>
> (Kathryn, online participant, UK, 2011)

Many friendships between gamers (like Matt and Regina, and Jenny and Paul) develop into something more. Yee's (2006b) research with over 2000 gamers found that approximately 50% of women and 22% of men had developed intimate feelings for another gamer, and a further 29% of women and 8% of men had physically dated someone they first met in an online game. There is a significant difference between genders, with women reporting experiences of intimate relationships more than double that of men. This finding could be linked to hetero-dominant values and norms within gaming culture, and where normative constructions of masculinity and femininity influence performances of gender (Butler 1990). Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 170) states:

> Indeed, chat rooms that are designed for singles to meet potential partners may not be the best places to find someone to whom you might be attracted; a better place may be a community that revolves around a subject in which you are interested … Online romantic attraction is often a byproduct of an enjoyable, friendly

conversation; this is in accordance with characterizing online relationships as intrinsically valuable activities.

As Ben-Ze'ev suggests, there are more suitable places than online dating sites to meet potential partners where the people involved already have a common interest, and the online space of WoW is one such place. Over the past ten years technology has changed rapidly, and as it has evolved, so too has our understanding of the ways in which it can benefit and enhance various forms of communication on a social level. Not only has it expanded social networks on a global scale but it has done so in such a way that people are capable of making personal connections with others in a manner that is more *felt* (see, for example, Longhurst 2013). As such, this research aims to highlight the various ways in which online space is now being understood as emotionally charged space, and argues that for many internet users there is no 'disconnect' between their emotions and what is occurring online. For example, Chona, a 25 year old customer service manager living in the Philippines, aptly conveys the level of emotion and intensity evident in many online relationships:

> Spending too much time in a game with a person evolve[s] into something … It will make you realize that no matter where that person is across the globe that love is possible. A connection with someone in a game that you put your heart and time into is strong and powerful, and something that cannot be ignored. As a gamer, it is great to be in a relationship with someone who can understand your jargon, your excitement/frustration about the game and your addiction but if that person is someone you cannot touch and only long for and hope and wish for to be with, then be cautious. A person's heart can only take so much, being in love with someone too far away is just heartbreaking.
>
> (Chona, online participant, Philippines, 2011)

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Valentine and Holloway (2002, 307) agree that "forms of mass communication permeate boundaries between different spatial contexts, enabling people to extend themselves in space and time by finding information about or contacting people who are spatially distant from themselves". Also, Morrison *et al.* (2013, 513) state that "the ways in which people 'play out' scenes of love in their thoughts, fantasies and dreams play an important role in shaping desires in 'real' world situations". They also provide a critical discussion of love in all its various forms and argue:

> Despite the claims of some that love simply 'is' (i.e. it is 'natural', deeply felt, visceral and impossible to articulate), like any other notion it needs to be held up to critical scrutiny. It cannot be separated out from spatially. It is relational and deeply political (Morrison *et al.* 2013, 2).

Over the past two decades, the possibilities for finding intimate relationships in unlikely places have expanded dramatically. The most significant change comes from how intimate relationships are now being sought for, and found in, online spaces such as dating websites, and also in more uncommon places like online role-playing games. Furthermore, participants often express their surprise at the depth and rapport that is established in their online relationships, as is evident in Hannah's (35 year old social worker from Austria) comment:

> There were other nice guys playing WoW, with who I flirted a bit and they with me. There was one guy in particular, who was really disappointed that I was going to meet my hunter instead of him. I liked him a lot - he was funny, smart, nice to chat and to play with - but I did not feel this strong attraction towards him. I don't know/understand why it was stronger with the hunter than with him. To me it will always be a mystery how it can happen that you feel so connected with someone whom you have not seen or heard.

> And why something like this happens with one person and not
> with another, especially under these circumstances, I also consider
> a mystery.
>
> (Hannah, online participant, Austria, 2011)

Gabb *et al's* (2013, 7, emphasis in original) work on enduring love problematises normative notions of love and explores the ways in which women and men enable their relationships to endure (or flourish) within the "socio-cultural context of shifting discourses on love, 'marriage', partnership, intimacy and commitment … therefore, reorienting the conceptual emphasis onto the *connectors* which hold people together, that is to say, the meanings, practices and imaginings of *quality* and *stability* in long-term relationships". People are falling in love online and experiencing deeply intimate feelings during the course of their romance. Yet, it is sometimes still not perceived of as *genuine* love because it exists on the internet. As such, Hannah's comment above is an excellent example of the 'connectors' in their relationships, which for her felt 'real', and where there was no 'disconnect' between what they were experiencing on the screen and their own feelings/emotions. All of the participants involved in this research mentioned wanting to meet their online partners in 'real-life', and while many did, there were others who could not due to various obstacles (such as not being able to get away from work to travel). In the following section, I highlight two stories of how participants met in WoW, beginning with Nathan, an Australian PvP gamer who met and fell in love with Leeza, a PvE gamer from the Phillipines. This is followed by Matt and Regina's story (both New Zealanders living in Auckland) and how they first met in WoW, became friends and later met in 'real-life'. I discuss how these relationships formed, as well as the ways in which they negotiated physical (distance) and social barriers.

**When online gaming becomes more**

Several participants mentioned that their experiences of online love began with them disliking their partners-to-be. Take, for example, Nathan, a 24 year old

university student from NZ. Nathan describes how he met and fell in love with Leeza, a woman living in the Philippines. Yet, their friendship was one that grew over several years and began with Leeza having an extreme dislike of Nathan. Nathan explains:

> We actually met a long time ago in the days before Barthilas (Oceanic Server) was released. This is still in Vanilla WoW where max level was 60. One day I was on my Undead Rogue (Frostmourne [realm]) ganking[52] Alliance low levels in Stranglethorn Vale and I came across a level 34 pink pig-tail warlock gnome. After I had killed her twice she didn't respawn for 10mins, unlucky for her that I am quite a patient and adamant person … I ended up killing her quite a number of times before someone on horde whispered me telling me to leave her alone. It just so happens that the person who told me that was her boyfriend.
>
> (Nathan, online participant, NZ, 2011)

Fortim and Grando (2013) argue that there are many myths about women gamers embedded in the dominant discourse of online gaming culture, such as that women do not enjoy playing games and are seen as 'fake gamers', or that a woman games only as a way to spend time with her male 'significant other'. Fortim and Grando (2013, 3) state that it is "common to hear about players who are constantly invited, and sometimes even coerced, into relationships with male avatars" and that women who game are often viewed as potential partners both online and offline. Nathan and Leeza's relationship may not exhibit all of the examples highlighted by Fortim and Grando (2013), however, there is a level of heterosexual hegemony at play which affects the way in which their relationship evolves (as

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[52] In gaming terms "ganking" means "killing" and typically involves a group of players (or one high level player) ganging up on one or more lower level players who have little to no chance of defending themselves.

demonstrated in the following commentary by Nathan). Nathan goes on to explain that he and Leeza's boyfriend became friends from that point onwards and as a result, Nathan, Leeza and her boyfriend all moved to a new realm within the game shortly after its release. At that point, however, Leeza's animosity towards Nathan had not changed:

> Even after we moved servers she disliked me, from her mouth she said I was arrogant, obnoxious and a smart arse. I can attest to that and say she is right, I was quite an elitist in the gaming world (not in real life) and I PK'd [player killed] or at least tried to PK just about everyone I came across.
>
> (Nathan, online participant, NZ, 2011)

Nathan went on to say that after two years of playing he decided to quit the game due to it becoming too easy, but started playing WoW again a few months after the Wrath of the Lich King expansion was released. He soon starting talking to one of the people who he used to share a guild with and inquired about Leeza and her boyfriend, only to find out that Leeza's boyfriend had switched to playing for the opposite faction, Horde:[53]

> I moved my character to horde and got in contact with him. We caught up with each other on what we've been doing since we had last spoken; his relationship with [Leeza] had ended over a year ago [and] they were on bad terms … Apparently she [had] stopped playing but [then] retook up the game on server Vek'Nilash Alliance, which is a PvE server as she hated being PK'd (I feel actually responsible for that as I am the reason she hated PKers). I didn't want to move my main character to a PvE server so I made

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[53] There are two opposing factions in WoW. One is Horde, and the other is Alliance. Players on a PvP server can attack, or be attacked by the opposing faction at any time.

a new character and got in contact with her, despite our rocky friendship.

<div align="center">(Nathan, online participant, NZ, 2011)</div>

Here, it is important to briefly highlight the differences between PvP (player vs. player) and PvE (player vs. environment, aka normal) gaming environments in order to fully understand Nathan's decision. Kelly (2004, 42) states: "games with 100% of their land set aside for player killing have a different ethos than other MMORPG games … and the emotional environment is quite striking to anyone used to a normal MMORPG game." To people unfamiliar to PvP environments, they are often viewed as realms full of bullish, swaggering alter-egos. Sheard and Won (2012, 2), for example, point out that "PVP gameplay is the virtual act of dominating or evoking pain and despair in others, and ultimately taking another human's life. In other words, psychologically, it is similar to committing an act of physical/emotional harassment and/or homicide".

Many gamers (like Nathan) who are passionate about PvP game-play enjoy the excitement of tormenting, hunting and killing other online gamers. Consequently, they do not typically enjoy PvE play-style, and often prefer not to be associated with it. Therefore, it is important to understand the seriousness of Nathan's decision in switching from a PvP to a PvE server. It is also interesting that he was willing to go to these lengths for a 'rocky friendship', knowing as he did, that Leeza had a certain amount of disdain for him. Nathan explains:

I figured it'd still be good to catch up. I didn't see her online for about a week but when I did we started talking. She actually disliked me more than I had anticipated but she claims she got over it. After an hour or so I made an official character on the PvE server. (At that time what was going through my head was anything and everything. Never in my life would I move to a PvE server but if you were to ask me now I'd say it was more to get to know her; I

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honestly don't know lol.) So yeah I quit my horde character and made the PvE server my official main character's server. We became really good friends and after a year I had once again grown tired of the game and quit. This time however, me and Leeza continued to communicate via Yahoo IM and email. In fact we became such good friends mentally I became attracted to her and told her how I felt. She was shocked but had felt strongly about me since we all first became friends and here I thought she had always hated me because she'd always spite me. Call me names and try to leave me out of everything. So anyways we ended up trying to date over the internet, it was my first time doing so and I honestly didn't know how long I'd last given the lack of physical connection we have due to the distance. In 2010 she moved to [the South Island of] New Zealand [where I live] for 6 months before she got a nursing job in [the North Island]. I wasn't happy that I would once again be considered long distance but she is worth it. I haven't seen her since 24th January 2011 [more than 9 months ago] but plan to spend all summer with her. We frequently Skype one another and talk on a daily basis. I proposed to her last summer just before coming home and hope to be married in the Philippines shortly after I graduate.

(Nathan, online participant, NZ, 2011)

It is important to note how place 'matters' in Nathan and Leeza's relationship. There is a substantial body of work by feminists such as Pratt (1999; 2012), and Tyner (2013) which discusses Filipino culture and the exploitation of Filipino people as migrant workers. Pratt (1999), for example, highlights how Filipino women can have different motivations when migrating and that they often put up with a lot of unacceptable behaviour in order to continue working in another country. My discussion here is speculative as it is uncertain whether or not these particular factors had any influence on Leeza's decision to remain in a relationship

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with Nathan. Given the origin and 'rocky' status of their burgeoning friendship, however, this speculation provides a new way in which to understand what kinds of intimate and loving relationships gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond.

Harper (2014) notes that in spaces such as video games, relationships between gamers are forged within discursive environments. As such, Harper reflects on feminist and queer theory (in particular, Butler's (1990; 1993) work) to further examine the ways in which interactions and styles of game-play are connected to performances of identity. PvE and PvP are distinctly different playstyles and this is evident in Nathan's comments above, as he talks about how Leeza reacted to his PvP game-play tactics (and it is important to note that Nathan's style of play is common for most PvP gamers). Also, on PvP servers, it is common for one player to attack another without any provocation. The only time this does not happen is when players are in a neutral area, where it is impossible to engage in a fight unless the other player consents to it first. While PvP may be viewed as somewhat anti-social, it is nevertheless, another form of social play, where gamers interact and forge relationships. As Harper (2014, 7) states, different forms of social play encompass "not only how players *literally* play together - in other words, interact with a text together - but also how they engage in the culture of gameplay together. Online forums and communities, tournament events, and fan work are all aspects of social play" (emphasis in original). As in Nathan's case, PvP players will often agree to stop their tactics if requested. Most PvP players, however, tend to assume that the other players on their server not only prefer that particular style of play (otherwise why else would they be there), but also that the other players are as well versed with PvP practices as they are.

With a 20% female subscriber base, it is understandable that most gamers in WoW automatically assume that the people they are playing with, or against, are other

men (Yee 2005a).[54] Yet, it is typical in one way or another for gendered identities to be made visible in a variety of ways. For example, in reflecting on Butler's (1990; 1993) work, Harper (2014, 5) notes:

> We constantly do and say things – and people do and say things *to* and *around* us – that construct us as gendered individuals over and over again. Society is constantly asking us to respond to it in gendered terms, so we have to engage in this performance all the time. Sometimes we can consciously change the performance if we want to resist, but that's not always possible; sometimes we have to conform to survive. While this is a simplification of a very complex idea, the basic notion is that our identity – or part of it, gender in this case – is related to the things we do, every day, just as part of living with other people in the world (emphasis in original).

Nathan's story of how he met and fell 'in love' with Leeza, which began as a 'rocky' friendship is similar to several other participants in this study, who also reported 'falling' for people that they thought they would never be friends with, l*et al*one love. Nathan and Leeza then met offline and became engaged. The often unconscious privileging of mind over body is a topic that many feminist theorists such as Grosz (1992) and Rose (1993) critique. In Nathan's comment above, he makes the distinction between physical and mental attraction, stating, "In fact we became such good friends mentally I became attracted to her". Not only does this comment highlight the privileging of this position but it also reveals how customary it is for many gamers and other internet users to conceptualise their online activities as being bodiless, even though one could argue that psychological

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[54] This 20% is based on the number of female players across all realms, including PvE, PvP, and RP. Yee's (2005) study of gender and server type preferences in WoW suggests that the number of women playing on PvP servers (5.6%) is significantly less than that of PvE (62.5%), whereas, there was not a significant difference for RP servers, with both men and women showing an equal preference for RP servers.

attractions could not possibly exist without those emotions being felt (first-and-foremost) in and through the body. The connectedness between mind and body, however, becomes obvious in debates surrounding online intimacy and sex, which is something which I examine further in the following chapter.

Matt and Regina's friendship and subsequent intimate relationship evolved over the course of a year. In the beginning they belonged to the same guild and consequently, knew of each other. This continued for several months before becoming close friends in the game. During our interview, they both recalled the first time that they had a conversation, which at the time, was about NZ's right-wing Prime Minister (PM), Jenny Shipley, for whom they shared a mutual dislike. At the same time neither Matt nor Regina were interested in developing any romantic ties, as Regina was already intimately involved with another gamer from Australia, who also was a member within the same guild. Given that most of the people in their guild were players based in Australia, Regina did not really expect anyone in particular to understand or even respond to the joke she had made about NZ's PM. So when Matt replied to her with a similar joke about the PM she was pleasantly surprised to find that there was another NZer in the guild, and that was the first time that they actively engaged in conversation and began to get to know one another. Matt commented that from that point onwards "we started talking together that first 'Jenny Shipley night' and then we started questing together." As Matt mentions, he and Regina started to spend more time together in WoW, and as their friendship grew, they eventually discovered that not only were they both living in NZ but that they also lived quite close to each other, approximately 10 minutes drive apart.

Matt and Regina's friendship over the course of the next few months remained completely textual. They had never heard one another's voice, nor had they seen each other. Regina's online relationship with the Australian guild member had also started to deteriorate, and it was around this time Matt and Regina decided that they would like to meet as friends in the real-world:

Matt: When we first met each other, we were only really meeting as friends.

Regina: I was, shall we say, unavailable at the time, unfortunately, with another online person in WoW.

Cherie: How long was it before you became intimately involved?

Regina: We decided to meet face-to-face, physically because obviously being in the same city we could do that. So we met up in a café but even meeting up in the café, we were still just friends at that point. Then thankfully shortly afterward, I split with that other guy.

Matt: Yeah and then things started snowballing from there.

Regina: (Laughs) Snowballing alright.

Matt: Well at that point I was coming over every so often anyway.

Regina: Yeah cause we got on so well that we just liked to hang out together.

Matt: Yeah, right off the bat were like [clicks fingers].

Regina: It was like "hey do you want to come over and have some drinks or watch a movie or whatever?"

Matt: Yeah it was like the first few nights I stayed over the whole night and we were watching things like Ace Ventura [the movie].

Regina: (Laughs) Staying up until five o'clock in the morning just talking.

(Matt and Regina, interviewees, October 2010)


From my discussions with Matt and Regina it was obvious that their online and offline worlds had become interconnected, from the early stages of their friendships, through to their intimate relationship. For example, when I asked them, "so do you think that your relationship developed as much in real-life as it did online?" Regina and Matt responded:

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Regina: Yeah, I mean it was sort of like we were best friends for a
while and then just being together was sort of a natural
progression. I mean, I don't think there's really much
difference between us just being friends and us being
intimate - obviously, other than having intimate things going
on (laughs). But it's more like, first and foremost, we're best
friends. Because even when we were friends, aside from the
obvious boyfriend girlfriend things, we didn't really act or
treat each other any different from when we were just
friends.



**Figure 5.2: Matt and Regina's avatars in WoW having a romantic picnic. ©
Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

Matt: And that's really been the way it's always been. Like even
when we got married, nothing changed and we didn't expect
to. Just because we've always wanted to keep the
relationship at the same sort of level that it's always been at.

Regina: I mean, obviously when we were *just* friends we weren't
in love with each other, per se. But for me, it's sort of a love
that started out as, you love your best friend because they are
an awesome person, and it just sort of grew into being in-
love.

<div align="right">(Matt and Regina, interviewees, NZ, 2010)</div>

Matt and Regina thought of their online friendship as 'ideal' to carry-over and
maintain in their offline relationship. In Blizzard's *World of Warcraft: Looking For
Group Documentary* (2014a), several gamers at BlizzCon, including Blizzard
employees discuss the social element of the WoW from their perspective:

Wow developer: WoW fans don't mess around. They take World of
Warcraft seriously. We always say there's two main characters –
there's the player and the world.

Man at BlizzCon #1: WoW just always has that loving community. It's
always there to support you. It's always there to help.

Woman at home in wheelchair: The one thing that keeps me playing, that
keeps me coming back would have to be the people that I've met
there. It's just awesome to belong.

Woman at BlizzCon #1: My youngest son was diagnosed with leukaemia
and the community helped us get through it, so *thank you*.

Woman gamer #2: My mom's actually handicapped. She has MS. It was a
really awesome way for my mom to feel like she could get out and
really experience the world.

Man at BlizzCon #2: As a veteran, for myself, it gives me a second home.

Man at BlizzCon #3: I've made tonnes of friends through the game. I've
made many different friends [laughs], speaking of which [greets a
friend on the street].

Man at home: The most meaningful relationship that I've developed in World of Warcraft has got to be my marriage. One thing led to another. A couple of years later we're married with two children.

Couple at BlizzCon: In WoW I met my current husband, him.

Woman at BlizzCon #3: Meeting my boyfriend Jackson, or Bishera [camera switches to Jackson]. You guys provided a medium for us to meet when we were states away!

Jackson: She server transferred IRL so that we could work on establishing a garrison together.

Blizzard employee: My wife is somebody that I met in World of Warcraft. We started to play together more and more often. Eventually we started dating and the rest is history [laugh].

Woman at BlizzCon #4: It's the community. It's the people that I play with. We have so much fun. These people have become my family. I've never seen ... I've never seen a game become this powerful!

Sociality is an integral part of online gaming. As well as the degree in which technology is increasingly becoming implicated into some of the most intimate aspects of our lives. Intimate and romantic attachments occur so often within many online environments (Bardzell and Bardzell 2008). As a result, some gamers meet offline and get married, and some also choose to celebrate their union by becoming married within the game itself. In the following section I examine the phenomenon of in-game weddings.

**WoW weddings**

In WoW there is the potential for people to form long-term complex and intimate relationships which sometimes result in online marriages. Two participants in this study, Matt and Regina are married with two children. Out of all of the participants involved in this study, Matt and Regina were the only ones who got married in both 'real-life' and WoW, with many of their friends and family in attendance for both ceremonies. Much like their offline wedding, Matt and Regina

chose to record their online wedding so that they could look back and remember the event. Many gamers, like Matt and Regina record their online wedding ceremony, and thousands of these recordings can be found on various websites such as YouTube.[55] The following images are from Matt and Regina's video footage of their wedding in WoW:



**Figure 5.3: Matt and Regina standing either side of the marriage celebrant. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**



**Figure 5.4: Matt and Regina's wedding ceremony. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

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[55] A recent search of YouTube.com for the phrase "World of Warcraft wedding" revealed over 2,500 video clips. This includes wedding ceremonies between same-sex couples. A search without quotes marks found over 84,000 results.

When asked why they chose to hold a wedding in-game, Matt and Regina said that many of their online friends, who they wanted to share their wedding day with, could not make it to their offline wedding. Regina explains, "a lot of our friends are online … and couldn't make it, so we were like 'we'll do an online wedding because then it doesn't matter where in the world you are, you can still come'". Their online wedding ceremony was held approximately two months after their offline wedding, around the same time as Valentine's Day which (as already mentioned) is also celebrated and recognised as a world event on WoW's in-game calendar.

Weddings are sometimes part of celebratory events, such as Gay Pride Parades which occur annually in various online games, such as Second Life and WoW. In Second Life, for example, the "dykes on bikes" parade in 2004 culminated in the online wedding of two same-sex couples, who were also committed partners offline. Book (2004, 11) states that events such as this closely mimic real-world Pride parades and argues that they "provide one of the clearest examples of the ways in which virtual worlds can successfully include elements of offline identities, including sexuality". Book continues:

> For those who physically live in less tolerant geographical areas, a
> virtual world may be the only place they can comfortably or safely
> express a GLBT identity … The ability to connect with others in an
> international GLBT community helps them feel less isolated and
> their membership in this community has helped them in all facets
> of their lives. To them, the virtual world is definitely not a game.

In-game weddings differ according to the preferences of those getting married, however, for the most part, they typically follow the same practices and rituals as real-world weddings. As such, many weddings and those participating within them perform in ways that reinforce hegemonic ideals and notions of love. Despite pressures to maintain traditional ideals it is possible for couple to

negotiate wedding rituals in ways that 'fit' them better as a couple. As noted by Fairchild (2013, 386) performances of gender in wedding rituals in contemporary society are being negotiated in ways that highlight the "social shifts evident in couples' circumstance and ideology" and which emphasizes how "the relationship between the ritual norms and the related social structure is not a perfect fit" (Fairchild 2013, 386). Drawing on works from feminist and poststructuralist theorists, such as Butler (1990; 1993) and Johnston (2006) aids in denaturalizing landscapes of heterosexual love. Matt and Regina's wedding, for example, followed certain normative traditions, such as the gathering of friends and family to witness the event, the bride walking down the aisle, the exchange of rings and vows, followed by the wedding celebrant's pronouncement of the couple as newly married. The couple then kiss to conclude the event.

Matt and Regina's wedding, however, did not quite conform to all of these 'traditional' ideals, with the most significant difference being that both Matt and Regina's avatars are both women. In contrast to other games, players of WoW are not restricted by any in-game marriage system, where players must conform to certain rules in order to be eligible for marriage (Wu *et al.* 2007). Marriages in WoW can be performed anywhere by anyone. Much like the people in Johnston's (2006) research, couples in WoW are also very particular about what kind of landscape they desire for their wedding ceremony. These sites usually depict normatively beautiful and serene landscapes, such as the moonwell setting pictured in Figure 5.3. It is also customary for wedding participants to let off fireworks and other graphic enhancements which aid in portraying the emotion and affect that is carried by those in attendance of the ceremony.

These types of conditions do not apply in WoW, therefore, when gamers in WoW get married they can be as imaginative and creative with their ceremony as they want. The avatar that Matt chose to represent his virtual self in their online wedding is his 'main' character, and it is also the character that he was using when he met Regina for the first time. Offline, Matt identifies as a heterosexual man and

Regina as a heterosexual woman. In WoW, however, they both readily accept that their avatars are not, with Regina stating, "so his character ended up being a lesbian and my character ended up being bisexual … Some of the comments about our WoW wedding were kind of funny because there were people laughing at the fact that both of our characters are female and getting married" (Regina, interviewee, October 2010).

According to Butler (1990; 1993), performances of gender and sexuality are influenced by socially constructed norms. Never has this been more evident than in online role-playing games and the relationships that form within the realms of digital environments. Butler (1988) also argues that if we examine the regulatory system that performances of gender and sexuality are based upon, we see how non-confirmative acts of sex and gender are punished, and which also demonstrates that acts of sex and gender are not pre-discursive. While it has been said that digital space is a place which offers opportunities for queer practices to emerge (such as experimenting with new performances and the usage of different bodies), it has also been criticised by researchers who highlight the ways in which offline socio-cultural ideals affect online norms surrounding identity constructions (Eklund 2011). This is evident in Matt and Regina's wedding when certain guests commented on both their avatars being women.

It is becoming common practice for game developers to include the option of in-game weddings for players. For example, after receiving numerous requests from players, the developers of *Diablo II* implemented additional tools which provided gamers with the ability to perform in-game weddings (Radde-Antweiler 2007). Also, certain games, such as Skyrim provide additional 'perks' to gamers who get married to NPCs. Also, games such as MapleStory and Ragnarok Onlin*e* provide extra benefits to players who marry other online gamers within the game's digital environment. In contrast, some game developers (such as those involved in The Lord of the Rings Online) have contemplated the idea of introducing in-game

marriages but have not proceeded due to the controversy surrounding the potential for same-sex and/or inter-species marriages (GamePolitics.com 2007).

Digital space enables us to increase significantly the number of people and the types of people that we interact with. People are willing to meet you in WoW and introducing yourself and/or initiating a personal relationship is often just a matter of pressing a button (Ben-Ze'ev 2004, 178). When asked about in-game marriages, many of the participants in this study had not considered it for themselves, nor did they view it as a serious option. Similarly, Yee (2003b) also notes this, stating that the majority of MMORPG players view the idea of getting married in-game or online as 'silly', due to the rationalisation of seeing it as a less valid counterpart of real-world weddings. With this in mind, Yee argues for a different conceptualisation of in-game marriages, stating:

> A virtual wedding is a combination of social entertainment, extensive role-playing and sometimes political intrigue. Instead of thinking of a virtual wedding as the corrupt bastard child of a real world contractual agreement, the virtual wedding should be considered as an elaborate form of collaborative digital story-telling – a ritual in its own right that fulfils a completely different purpose (Yee 2003b, unpaginated).

Essentially, Yee's argument is correct, in that online weddings can and should be seen as elaborate forms of digital story-telling. This argument, however, does not account for the ways in which online weddings are utilised by gamers (like Matt and Regina) who are more interested in holding these ceremonies as a way to celebrate their love and affection for one another, and to also share these emotions with their various online friends and family members. Geographies of emotion and affect (Pile 2010; Shaw and Warf 2009; Thrift 2008) are relevant here as many online couples might choose to marry in-game and share their wedding ceremonies with friends and family in attendance.

**Summary**

Thompson and Cupples (2008, 103) argue that the performative relations and patterns that emerge out of technocultures "are dissolving boundaries between public and private, human and non-human, presence and absence, and real and virtual". Throughout this chapter, I have discussed some of the ways in which this is evident within relationships between online gamers. There are many kinds of intimate and loving relationships that gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond. I began by introducing Jenny and Paul and how their relationship progressed from an online friendship that became much more intimate. This is evident in Jenny and Paul's story, as over the course of their journey they had to make many difficult decisions in order to be together, such as leaving their 'real-life' partners and enduring an online relationship that lasted two years before meeting each other. The interview data presented in this chapter highlights the various ways in which relationships form and are negotiated between gamers in WoW. For example, the role of friendship in online games and how it aides in providing new avenues for meeting and interacting with people who might have never met offline due to social barriers which would otherwise restrict them from forging these friendships.

As a continuation from friendship, I highlight how online game environments offer a more affective space for meeting people who could be a potential love match. I then described Matt and Regina's relationship and drew upon various factors to further highlight the significance of friendship and its role in developing online intimate relationships. Distance between online partners proved to be a significant factor for most participants, therefore, I drew upon several examples of how participants either withdrew from their online relationships because they found it to be too much of an obstacle, while others persisted and managed to successfully negotiate it. Following this, I discussed another element of online relationships regarding the unexpected relationships that can develop between gamers when they are not expecting it, and I concluded

this chapter by examining the phenomenon of WoW weddings. As such, these discussions emphasise the ways in which relationships between gamers can be understood as embodied experiences and where WoW as an expansive and intricate virtual world can become a medium for players to experience various emotional and affectual geographies. In the following section, I take a closer look at the ways in which cybercheating can affect relationships.

# CHAPTER 6: Violence, misogyny and cybercheating

In this thesis I examine multiple kinds of gendered power relations that are constructed within WoW's online gaming culture and how these affect gamers' personal relationships, both online and offline. In discussing these power relations I also reflect upon material in Chapters 4 and 5, such as the connection between gamers and avatars, online/offline representations of self, and the ways in which friendships and romantic relationships are experienced. The social and cultural context of online gaming is now better understood as consisting of a diverse array of social networks, where emotions and concerns are *felt* and experienced by those participating in these online environments (Ash 2013; Yee 2014). Issues such as sexism, misogyny and cybercheating are also present in online games.

First, I introduce this chapter by discussing the hyper-sexualisation of avatars in relation to the portrayal of sex and gender within online games. I look at how these representations, particularly of females, impact women gamers and their participation within a male dominant socio-cultural online environment. Then I discuss contentious issues, such as misogyny and sexism which are embedded in many online gaming cultures yet seldom linked to the intimacy of online relationships, such as the dominance of patriarchal value systems, misogyny, online sex (also commonly referred to as 'cybersex'), and cybercheating, and how they, in turn, affect friendships and intimate relationships within these gaming environments. In doing so, I provide an examination of the ways in which sexism and misogyny are present within the gaming industry, reflecting on elements of game design, dominant gaming discourse, and the backlash against those who critique games from a feminist perspective. Second, I examine online sex and erotic role-play (ERP), activities which occur within most online games. Some participants use ERP as a way of connecting with their online partners. These discussions offer an understanding of how online relationships that involve activities such as online sex can be understood as both emotional and embodied experiences. Third, I explore the topic of online infidelity. Here I highlight

participants' experiences of 'cybercheating' and how it affects them as either the one who was being cheated on, or as the one who was cheating on their offline partner (with an online lover). While most participants think of their online relationships as 'real', there are some who readily make the distinction between 'real' and 'virtual', and as such, rationalise their online relationships as fantasy or fiction. Therefore, even though someone may have an offline partner, they may not view their online relationships as 'cheating'.

**Women as hyper-sexualised bodies in online games**



**Figure 6.1: Two avatars wearing the same "Glorious" armour set. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

This discussion reflects on some of the elements of gender and sexuality that were discussed in Chapter 4, however, this section presents an examination of the link between sexualisation of avatars and violence against women. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which gaming culture and dominant discourse affect these

representations of gender and sexuality. In WoW and many other games, for example, the bodies of male avatars are typically hyper-masculine in appearance. Occasionally, however, their armour options can be revealing, in that they show a lot of skin. While it is rare to see male avatars donning 'skimpy' armour styles, it is extremely common to see female avatars dressed in this 'bikini' style armour. It is also important to note that while there are revealing and sexualised armour styles for male avatars available, they are not typically worn and rarely seen in-game. There is, for instance, a particular piece of level 33 armour in WoW called "Sandrene's Invisible Vest", which as the title suggests, is invisible. For male avatars, this means that they appear bare-chested, while female avatars appear wearing a red bikini top. This piece of armour has no function for avatars (aside from style and fashion) once they surpass level 33, as the associated statistics assigned to it will be too low level to be of benefit. Game designers are increasingly providing players with a wider variety of appearance choices, which is demonstrated by WoW's recent addition of transmog vendors that provide players with more versatility for changing their avatar's appearance.[56] Generally, I chose to portray my own avatars in raiding style armour, which is more in-line with thick plate armour that covers every part of the body (see Figure 6.2, left).

The wearing of raid style armour is deliberate and it is done in order to 'down-play' both my avatar's, and my own, sexual presence. There was a time, however, when I decided to experiment with one of my avatars because I could not find a set of armour that I liked the look of, and chose to clothe her in armour that was more sexually suggestive. This was the first time and I was also curious to see if anybody would notice the change. Consequently, quite soon afterwards one of my male guild friends commented, "what's with your toon's armour? It looks a bit slutty". There were also other occurrences, such as another player (unknown to

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[56] At present, however, "Sandrene's Invisible Vest" is one item that is not available for transmog, which player's critique on the following threads: http://www.wowhead.com/item=59295#comments and: http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/8568399206

me) who whistled at me after using an enchantment to mirror my avatar's image
(where they looked exactly like my avatar).



**Figure 6.2: My avatar Asha wearing two contrasting sets of armour styles with typical Raiding style armour set on left and 'bikini' style armour on right. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

The ways in which female avatars are visually constructed and portrayed in most online games typically works to enhance their subjective positioning as sexual objects. Sarkeesian (2014, unpaginated) offers an analysis of how women are represented in popular video games (including the hyper-sexualisation of female avatars) and argues that the use of sexual or domestic violence as a form of narrative background has become a pervasive element in modern gaming, and goes on to say that the majority of virtual women in games are being portrayed typically as background decoration. They exist predominantly as:

> A subset of largely insignificant non-playable female characters
> whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy,

gritty or racy flavouring into game worlds. These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players.

Yee (2014) correctly points out that often the same piece of armour worn by players in a game is designed to fit differently depending on the gender of their character, with female avatars typically displaying a more sexualised body image that reveals more flesh (see Figure 6.1). The hyper-sexualisation of women not only occurs in games but is a standard strategy employed in many media campaigns across various cultures in order to attract consumer audiences. It is still common place for women to be treated as sexualised bodies within various media campaigns. The fact that hyper-sexualised portrayals of women are so 'everyday' is often reflected upon in various online commentaries, including numerous commentaries on YouTube, which can be found using search keywords such as 'sexism' and 'video games'. Not only do these particular debates attempt to normalise the objectification of women in both games and western culture, but they also work to perpetuate the minority positioning and sexual discrimination of women (Bertozzi and Lee 2007).

Yee (2014, 113) draws on compelling research that argues that hypersexualised images of women in games not only increases gamers' sexist beliefs but also their acceptance of the rape myth, that is, gamers "exposed to scantily clad female avatars were more likely to believe that women who get raped deserve it because of their perceived promiscuity." Both men and women who critique the construction of avatars, particularly the portrayal of female toons, can sometimes find themselves on the receiving end of hate mail and other harassments. Take, for example, Anita Sarkeesian, who openly examines these issues in an articulate and academic manner via an internet blog titled *Feminist Frequency.* She has received numerous threatening message (many of which are posted in the feedback column contained within the blog site), including rape and death threats from angry

people who disagree with her views (Lewis 2014; Newton 2014). The negative and abusive comments posted on Sarkeesian's blog forum were left there. Her decision not to remove it, however, is rare, as it is common practice for the owner of blog sites to moderate or remove inappropriate and abusive remarks (Lewis 2014). This in turn aided in demonstrating some of the more extreme ways in which this type of sexism can surface within gaming culture, and how it influences both online and offline attitudes towards sex and gender in games. As such, the campaign of hatred being targeted at Sarkeesian has gained a lot of attention, however, it has also highlighted the extent of misogyny and sexism that is present within gaming culture. In October 2014 Sarkeesian was due to give a speech to students at Utah State University regarding her work on women in games. This address was cancelled, however, after it became known that someone had emailed the university threatening to commit mass murder if Sarkeesian's lecture went ahead. Part of the email read:

> This will be the deadliest school shooting in American history, and I'm giving you a chance to stop it ... I have at my disposal a semiautomatic rifle, multiple pistols, and a collection of pipe bombs ... I will write my manifesto in her spilled blood, and you will all bear witness to what feminist lies and poison have done to the men of America (Kolhatkar 2014, unpaginated).

Unfortunately, Sarkeesian is not the first feminist critic to be harassed, nor is she likely to be the last. Take, for example, game designer Jenn Frank, who recently resigned due to cyber-bullying, which occurred after she wrote a short article titled "How to attack a woman who works in video gaming" (Frank 2014a). In this article Frank discusses not only Sarkeesian's recent experiences but also those of another game designer Zoe Quinn (a developer for the experimental adventure, Depression Quest), and who like Sarkeesian, also had to leave her home after experiencing an online campaign of hatred (Frank 2014b). All three of these women have been cyber-bullied to such an extent that they have feared for their

lives. Kolhatak (2014) reports that law enforcement officials, however, tend not to take online threats seriously, as the level of anonymity that is obtainable in online space allows trolls and stalkers to act with impunity, simply because they can. Consequently, the actions of these cyber-bullies have prompted noticeable tension within the gaming industry, and those that work within the industry are actively coming forward and calling for an end to gender discrimination in gaming. On September 1, 2014, an open letter was posted online and signed by over 2,000 people who all work within the games industry, and who are now urging people within their various gaming communities to take a stand against "hateful, harassing speech". The letter reads:

> We believe that everyone, no matter what gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or disability has the right to play games, criticize games and make games without getting harassed or threatened. It is the diversity of our community that allows games to flourish.
>
> If you see threats of violence or harm in comments on Steam, YouTube, Twitch, Twitter, Facebook or reddit, please take a minute to report them on the respective sites.
>
> If you see hateful, harassing speech, take a public stand against it and make the gaming community a more enjoyable space to be in (Zecher 2014, unpaginated).

Pile (2010, 10) makes the argument that "there are shared coordinates in the latitude and longitude of emotional and affectual geography ... This is a shared ontology: emotions move; affects circulate." Pile continues to say that emotions and affects are always mobile and that while they both have a place for 'patterns' of emotions or affects, there is a continuous flow *between* people and other things. What is occurring within the game industry is a reflection of this shared ontology that is seeing a new surge in people supporting initiatives for change within the gaming industry. In October 2014, the gaming industry's main trade group,

Entertainment Software Association (ESA) released a statement saying: "Threats of violence and harassment are wrong ... they have to stop. There is no place in the video game community – or our society – for personal attacks and threats" (Kolhatkar 2014, unpaginated). While this is a progressive step, there is still some way to go, as the majority of the individual game companies have yet to speak out. It is uncertain what is causing this lack of action from individual game companies "in whose name the war is being waged" (Kolhatkar 2014, unpaginated). It is arguable, however, that the evident lack of action is due to the issue not being taken seriously, as it does not directly impact either the company's revenue stream, or the majority of industry employees who are male.

In many countries women are largely under-represented in the field of technology, including the gaming industry, and this gender imbalance means that women are being excluded from a very important power domain. Wakeford (1997, 52) suggests that as such "we should not be surprised if electronic networks are experienced by many women as 'male territory'". There has been much work by feminist geographers that examine various aspects of geographies of fear and how women in particular negotiate space (see, for example, Pain (1991), Pain and Smith (2008), Valentine (1989). Therefore, it is important to highlight the affectual geographies of fear and the role they play. For example, the vicious nature of online attacks are making individuals hesitant to speak out, and those that do speak out (like Jenn Frank) often find that they have become recipients of cyber-stalking and cyber-bullying themselves. Academic researchers have also been targeted by GamerGate supporters, which has seen the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) accused of working with journalists to advance a feminist agenda. DiGRA released the following statement:

> The executive board of the Digital Games Research Association
> publicly condemns the harassment and bullying that some of its
> members have faced over the last few months due to their work
> researching and studying videogames. DiGRA is categorically

opposed to this kind of behaviour (DiGRA website: www.digra.org/digra-and-gamergate/).

The attacks on women and other game critics only heighten levels of concern for gaming culture as a whole, and they also effectively demonstrate the level of sexism and misogyny that have been embedded in games. Sarkeesian spoke at the XOXO Festival in Portland in October 2014, in order to address the issue of online harassment, stating that the production of video games is:

A multi-billion dollar industry with an enormous impact upon our cultural landscape. What you may not know is that gaming and gaming communities are currently undergoing a massive paradigm shift. The cultural, political, and economic structures of the medium are in the process of fundamentally transforming. While women have always played and made games, for several decades the industry catered almost exclusively to a straight white male demographic. This is no longer the case. The new reality is that gaming is becoming a more diverse and inclusive environment for everyone. That metamorphosis is happening slowly and sometimes painfully, but happening. This is great news. However, I am here today to share a little bit about the phenomenon of very vocal aggressive, mostly male gamers who are unwilling or unable to accept this new reality. Their reactionary response can only be described as a massive and terrifying assault directed at the female fans, developers and critics, who they feel are destroying games (XOXO 2014).

As Sarkeesian notes, the traditional norms present within games are now being challenged, however, these changes are often resisted. Gaming critic Suellentrop (2014) makes a compelling argument when he states that games are often viewed as the frontier of fiction, a cultural outpost, and capable of producing

environments that are in many ways intoxicating, if not always refined. Yet, as the father of two daughters, he worries that games "for all their promise, are not always welcoming to young women". The point of Suellentrop's article is to salute the women in the game industry that have been pioneers of, and key players in, the design and distribution of highly successful games. He also notes that at present "only 22 percent of the people who make video games are women ... That's abysmal, but it's also a rapid and drastic improvement, a near doubling from five years ago" (Sullentrop 2014, unpaginated). Also, Turton-Turner (2013, 4) argues:

> At the same time, online gaming has emerged as prodigiously gender-biased, not just in terms of the diminution of female characterizations to patriarchal stereotypes, or that women are paid less in the industry, but as Leah Burrows (2013) has pointed out, women "account for only 11 percent of game designers and 3 percent of programmers, strikingly low even when compared with the broader fields of graphic design and technology." Together with reiteration of gender repressive symbolism, this dynamic serves to encourage and perpetuate sexism in the formidable multi-billion dollar gaming industry.

Also in October 2014, Sarkeesian made a five minute television appearance on the Colbert Report show (a satirical USA political show). The host Stephen Colbert began the interview by questioning Sarkeesian's feminist position:

> Colbert: Let's put this on the line, let's call this what it is – you and the other feminazis in the gamer world are coming for our balls to snip 'em off, put them into a little felt purse and take them away so we have to play your non-violent games, right?
>
> Sarkeesian: No. There is something going on but what it is, is women being harassed and threatened and terrorised.

Colbert: But you first attacked male gamers for enjoying looking at big breasted women with tiny armour that barely covers their nipples. What is wrong with that? I like what that looks like. I'm a man baby. Newsflash. I like it.

Sarkeesian: One of the problems with that is that it actually reinforces the myth that women are sexual objects and sexual playthings for male amusement and we're not.

Colbert: We're saving them. They're damsels in distress. I'm saving the princess. Am I supposed to let the princess die? Is that what you want? That's kind of harsh. That's kind of hostile.

Sarkeesian: Maybe the princess shouldn't be a damsel, she could save herself.

The online attacks targeting women in games is now commonly referred to as #GamerGate. Its origins began when game designer Zoe Quinn (mentioned earlier) was accused by her ex-boyfriend of cheating on him when he posted a 9,000-word blog about their relationship on several online forums. This post then led to more accusations of Quinn having a romantic relationship with a video game critic from Kotaku, which is a journalistic website that reviews games. These accusations are unfounded, however, the actor Adam Baldwin penned the hashtag #GamerGate when he tweeted in support of angry gamers, and raised concerns about the alleged corruption within gaming journalism. Shortly afterwards Sarkeesian's online release of her critique of women in games (via the Feminist Frequency website) was picked up by #GamerGate supporters and became the next target for online attacks. In the following commentary, Colbert continues the interview by asking:

Colbert: Why do you think that women are being threatened? Because it's almost entirely women that are being threatened in GamerGate.

Sarkeesian: I think women are perceived as threatening because we are asking for games to be more inclusive and that we're asking games to acknowledge that we exist and we love games. We have this wide range of games, we're seeing mobile games and we're seeing indie games and an influx of these different kinds of games and that's what GamerGate is responding to. They're actually responding to the fact that gaming can no longer be this little boys club any more. There are many of us women who have been playing games our whole lives so they're lashing out as we're challenging the status quo of gaming as a male dominated space.

Colbert: What about accusations of collusion between designers, feminists and journalists? We're talking about ethics in gamer journalism. Do you understand how huge that is? I mean, what if there was no ethics in Hollywood journalism? If we can't trust Entertainment Tonight or TMZ then where does that leave us? Is that what you want for gamer journalism?

Sarkeesian: That is a compelling way to reframe the fact that these are actually attacks on women. Attacks on ethics in journalism is not what's happening in any way. It's actually men going after women in really hostile, aggressive ways. That's what GamerGate is about.

Colbert: As a man am I allowed to be a feminist?

Sarkeesian: Do you believe that women should have equal rights to men and that we should fight for those rights?

Colbert: Sure.

Sarkeesian: Great, then you're a feminist.

(The full version of this video interview can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L_Wmeg7OTU)

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Sarkeesian also argues that major game publishers "need to enforce a zero-tolerance policy of sexism and racism and homophobia. ... Developers need to start moving away from the entitled macho-male power fantasy in their games. They need to recognize that there are wider stories that they can tell" (Kolhatak 2014, unpaginated). If there was gender parity within the game industry, where half of all people involved in game design and development were women, would this prompt a significant change in the way that games are being made? For example, gender norms are embedded in cultural practices and one could argue that performances of gender and sexuality that reflect hegemonic values and norms may resurface in new game designs even if there was gender parity within the industry (Butler 1990). It is, however, important to continue looking for ways to improve politics of difference throughout gaming culture. As suggested, there is a need for more women to become involved in game development and that number is definitely on the rise, however, there will need to be emphasis placed on critiquing the ways in which gender and sexuality are assigned to storylines and characters within gaming contexts. Overall, the shift to a more balanced positioning of genders within gaming is a useful place to start. Yet this type of cultural shift will most likely occur slowly over time.

**"Oh my god it's a girl!"**

Within most gaming genres there are elements of violence that are a standard component of game design, such as killing particular NPCs, or other players in order to complete quests or mission objectives. In this respect, violence becomes part of the norm for gamers, however other, more social forms of violence are also part of the norm within online gaming cultures, such as sexist stereotyping and misogynistic behaviour and it is these types of violence that I address in this chapter. Behaviours aligned with sexism and misogyny are particularly evident in gaming environments where the number of male gamers is significantly higher than that of women, which is often the circumstance in the majority of games.

Since first beginning to play WoW five years ago, I have come to enjoy the dynamic and diverse interactions that are a part of socialising in online games, just as much as I enjoy socialising with offline friends. There are times, however, when masculinist and sexist behaviours impact upon my enjoyment of online games. It is important to note, however, that during these times, it is the friendships that I have forged with other online gamers that have kept me from abandoning game-play altogether. The reality for most women gamers is that they will inevitably become subject to various forms of flirtation, sexual objectification and harassment. Numerous studies show this but they also show that women have different ways of negotiating the masculinist spaces of online games (see Eklund 2011; Huh and William 2010).

> Given that men often outnumber women in networked video games and that masculine behavior is typically rewarded, this may provide men with the opportunity to express social dominance in the virtual world in a way they cannot in the physical world. As more women play these games, however, there may be a shift in atmosphere and players' behavior. It is unclear, though, whether positive changes can occur naturally in a hostile environment or whether more official interventions such as sexual harassment policies are necessary to evoke reform. Currently, harassment policies are nonexistent or loosely enforced in gaming communities, and thus sexual harassment remains a pervasive problem (Fox and Tang 2013, 4-5).

While playing WoW, I have established several different avatars within several different guilds. In one of my previous guilds I was also part of a 'raiding team' and in order to 'raid' efficiently players must interact and communicate with each other quite a lot in order to achieve successful outcomes. This team was made up of 10 members and I was the only woman. I consider all of these men to be friends, and as with most offline friendships, I g*et al*ong with some better than others. I

have found that one-on-one discussions with them are enjoyable and we often have in-depth exchanges about our various likes and dislikes. This changes, however, when there are several of us engaged in a group discussion. On these occasions, the group dynamic shifts quite significantly and it is common for the discussion to focus on me. Typically when this happens, it is because I have not remembered a certain aspect of the game and how it might work. If they become aware of it, it is usually thought of as hilarious and joked about (even though some of them may have made the exact same error in the past), in a way that depicts me as an ineffectual and/or incompetent gamer. Usually when I try to defend myself I am outnumbered by their comments and laughter, and so there is little room for logical or reasonable debate. As such, I often find myself resorting to using swear words. For example, at present in WoW, a common phrase being used by some gamers is, "go eat a dick" or "EAD".[57] This particular phrase is an example of how anti-gay language is used by gamers to exclude and marginalise other players.

Butler (1990) highlights how homophobic language can be seen as a larger party of heterosexist framework that works to exclude alternative representations of sex and gender. As such, the use of homophobic language is often used in an aggressive (such as the one above), or even violent context, which encourages gay gamers to remain silent. Yee (2009, unpaginated) notes that "even the most independent MMORPG player has to deal with the human element in these games. While fairly uncommon, every player has at one point or other been annoyed or angered by the selfish or malevolent actions of another player".  As such, there continues to be a growing number of studies that examine aggression in games and how gamers are influenced by the dominant discourses within those spaces (see, for example, Norris 2004; Yee 2014).

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[57] According to UrbanDictionary.com, the term "eat a dick" or EAD was first used in WoW when a guild member (after winning a massive battle) misspelt the word dead and instead wrote "EAD Mother Fuckers".

Often these guild conversations also involve varying degrees of sexual innuendo. For example, while talking over Ventrilo I once offered to assist one of my male guild friends on a quest, saying "would you like a hand?" To which he responded, "yes, but not with that". This response may seem innocent enough but the men in the Ventrilo chat channel understood it in reference to the sexual act of a 'hand-job'. Consequently, in order to participate within these guild conversations and other online social circles I have had to negotiate some uncomfortable discursive terrain just to maintain a presence as a 'serious' gamer. As a result of these ongoing social dynamics I have found my use of profane language increases exponentially when my opinion is disregarded and in conjunction, I become an increasingly angry gamer. In short, I sometimes find myself adopting traits of hegemonic masculinity in response to misogynistic occurrences. Yee (2014, 103) argues:

> Playing an online game can be a struggle for women. If you say you're a woman, few believe you. And if they do, you're now thought of as incompetent, someone whose opinions don't matter and who needs to be protected. For women who are experienced gamers, they also recognize that any mistake they make will be assigned to their gender rather than to circumstantial factors.

As Yee (2014) states, gaming in a male dominated culture can be challenging for many women. Fortunately, however, in games like WoW there are a lot of different guild cultures. For example, some guilds are made up primarily of women members, while others explicitly state their guild as being 'girl friendly' and have women in both their raid teams and in organisational roles. Furthermore, the fact that many guilds advertise being 'girl friendly' says a lot about the norms of gaming culture.

According to recent reports, the gender ratio of people playing online games has reached parity (Juul 2012). While this may be true, most of these studies observe gender ratios across a wide range of games, rather than examining ratios within

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specific games. For example, in games like WoW and Everquest II, the gender ratios are very uneven, where it is estimated that only 20% of all gamers are women (Yee 2014). It is often presumed that women have no interest in playing games and when they do there are two dominant stereotypes that are commonly associated with women who game; the first is that they are only involved in gaming because of their boyfriend, and the second is the assumption that what women enjoy most about online gaming is the social interaction (Taylor 2006). As such, not only are these assumptions heterosexist (in that they exclude sexualities that are non-hetero), but they also play into the gendered stereotypes of the talkative sociable woman, and the woman who will do anything to keep her boyfriend. Furthermore, in online games with a high percentage of male gamers, some women may find that their presence is unwelcome. In comparison, the online game Second Life has a gender ratio that is almost 50/50, however, even in this environment gamers are assumed to be men (playing as virtual women) and the dominant discourse is one that reinforces heterosexist and masculinist values and norms. Visual constructions of gender also reflect this, with a prevalence for highly sexualised avatar bodies (Dumitrica and Gaden 2009).

My own experience of gaming within male dominated spaces is often one where I sometimes find it difficult to establish a presence as a 'serious' gamer. This, however, is influenced by the dominant norms already embedded in gaming culture that affect my own positioning within certain groups. As Shaw (2012a, 34) notes, previous studies have found that women "do not generally identify as gamers … Moreover, a great deal of research on gender and games have described games as 'boys only' spaces". Often when I meet other gamers for the first time and it becomes known that I am a female gamer, I am usually either flirted with, or they do not believe that I am a woman. Sometimes I am even challenged to "prove it" (which, even if I wanted to, in most instances is impossible to do). As Yee (2014, 101) states, "for women, having to constantly justify your presence in online games quickly gets tiring. And if anything is a clear sign that you're not where you belong, it's when people question your body parts". Therefore, if it is

possible to do so, I often prefer to let other gamers assume I am a man (playing as a woman).

Sometimes raid teams are made up of random gamers, where the people in question do not already know one another, and these are called 'pick up groups' (PUGs). On one particular occasion I found myself filling in for another guild's group and as per usual I joined their Ventrilo chat channel. Upon speaking – saying "hello" – I was greeted with a response that I often hear, "oh my god it's a girl!" The raid's progression was going well, however, after two hours, a team member had to leave, due to his mother demanding that he go to bed because he had to attend high school the following day. The group's disappointment in having to finish early was understandable, however, the raid leader then proceeded to call the player's mother a "bitch, slut, whore", yet the player in question only responded by laughing and did not seem to take any offence to the abuse being directed at his mother. As both a gamer and a mother, I found the use of language extreme, however, I did not voice my opinion at the time because in this group I was the substitute fill-in and these players were known to each other. As such, I was unaware if this type of joking was a 'normal' occurrence. This particular occasion serves as a learning experience as it demonstrates how my own roles as researcher and gamer are complex and intertwined. Much of the language about women and being directed at women in games ranges from dismissive to abusive. As such, I am uncertain how my opinion would have been received had I said something. While online role playing games can afford players a safe place from gendered expectations, they can also "reinforce stereotypes by limiting the ways in which it is 'acceptable' for a female to play" (Fortim and de Moura Grando 2013, 3). As Fortim and de Moura Grando (2013, 3) state:

> Another possible reaction to the discovery that the person behind the avatar in a game is female is verbal aggression, since many players seem to think that the gaming community is no place for woman. "Attention whore!" is a sentence many women hear when

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they claim to be a woman. Many of them have stories about being verbally abused, for example, "woman don't know how to play," "go back to the kitchen," "you shouldn't be here," and/or sexual advances and threats.

In many ways, examples such as those above, typify Butler's (1990; 1993) discussions around gender and performativity, in that, as individuals we are expected to respond to social situations in gendered terms, and that all of us (even gamers) continue to react in ways that construct us as gendered beings. Recent studies examining violence in games consider the ways in which masculinity is linked to aggression and sexism towards women. For example, Scharrer (2005, 5) notes:

> Gamers themselves should also be mindful of the hypermasculine nature of networked games and its ability to alienate players. Even when harassment is not taking place, sexist language and other actions reinforce masculine norms and other features that may create a hostile environment. For example, it is not uncommon for players to refer to an enjoyable [and easy] victory as "raping" another player.

Gender performances in online games are exaggerated. For example, in order to avoid being labelled "gay", male gamers often communicate in a manner that is more aligned with misogyny, homophobia and hypermasculinity. My own experiences of socialising within online games have made me more conscious of how my gender and sexuality is interpreted by other gamers. For instance, shortly after I began gaming in WoW, one of my guild members questioned me about my sexual identity and made the assumption that I was a lesbian. I responded by asking him, "why do you think that?" He then explained that he and some of the other guild members had been speculating about it because of the fact that I did not have a current partner, nor did I make any sexualised references about men.

This particular experience left a lasting impression and it also aptly reflects Butler's (1990; 1993) argument in relation to how bodies become 'conditioned' to perform sexed and gendered identities in different places and spaces.

The dominant discursive practice evident in contemporary gaming culture is a worthy topic of examination, and over the past two decades there has been a growing volume of research that looks at how women's participation in online environments are affected by gender stereotyping, verbal harassment and sexual intimidation from men (Herring *et al.* 2001). Within one of my guilds I am part of a core team of raiders, and in one of our more recent runs, one of the men made sexually suggestive comments to me over Ventrilo. I happened to be the only female raider present and past experiences of similar encounters have shown that it is not always enough to just ignore the comments, as they can become even more exaggerated in their sexual suggestiveness due to the other men in the raid taking on what appears to be something of a 'pack mentality'. As noted by McCormack (2008, 6), we can understand affect as "a kind of vague but intense atmosphere" and feeling as "that atmosphere felt in the body". Therefore, this particular experience presents one example of how emotional and affective geographies can be understood within the context of online gaming/raiding. As a researcher and as a gamer, it is often difficult to perform assertively, as these spaces do not welcome activism from a feminist standpoint. In a game where masculine discourse is dominant, women are often considered 'outsiders' and some men consider women playing games to be a violation of normative gender behaviours (Fox and Tang 2013; Taylor 2006).

The following day after the aforementioned raid in which sexually suggestive comments were made, I made a point of private messaging the raider to explain why I found the encounter awkward and uncomfortable, also asking him in a direct manner, "can you please not flirt with me when we're raiding?" The raider was apologetic and wanted to know what he had said that was wrong. I explained that it wasn't about him saying any one particular thing. Rather, it was more to do

with the type of atmosphere his comments were creating in the game while we were raiding (and on the Ventrilo channel) between the other male gamers and myself, and where the other male gamers also began to make sexually suggestive remarks towards me, which effectively saw my position shift within the team from just another raider, to a woman objectified. Fortunately, this particular guild/raid member understood and this type of situation did not occur again. Consequently, we have since become close friends. In my experience, however, this was an unexpectedly positive outcome compared to past attempts to reason with raiders, which have been met with laughter and trivialised as just being 'fun'. Quinn (2002, 386) states, "women tend to see harassment where men see harmless fun or normal gendered interaction". Yet, in instances such as the latter, I am typically forced to consider whether or not I want to continue to raid with the team in question.

During one particular PUG raiding session there happened to be one other woman in the group. Upon my entering the raid group she announced, "yay, another girl!" To which one of the men responded, "yeah but girls don't *get al*ong". This last comment reflects a commonly held assumption that women gamers do not like each other. While there is every possibility of this happening, it has not been my experience, and over the past several years I have not experienced any conflicts with other woman gamers, nor met other women gamers who are in conflict with anyone else. During this raid I also received unwanted sexual advances, as shortly after joining the Ventrilo chat channel I was told by one of the men that I had a sexy voice, while another typed into raid chat, "are you hawt [hot]?" As a female gamer who identifies as heterosexual, I typically find these moments awkward and uncomfortable. Yet, research carried out by Geraci and Geraci (2013) shows that players respond differently to sexualisation. While some, like myself, prefer to avoid it, there are others, both female and male, who enjoy it.

**WoW sex**

It is potentially difficult or embarrassing for many people to open
up to researchers about their sexual attitudes and behaviours …

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While the space online might be a public space, nonetheless, the activities are often perceived as private and certainly are not understood to be data that ought to be available to researchers (Baker and Whitty 2008, 43).

Baker and Whitty (2008) point out that conversations relating to online relationships seldom include the topic of online sex. In this study, information on cybersex was not specifically sought, yet, a small number of participants thought it relevant to mention some of the ways in which online sex played a role in their relationships. Furthermore, discussing elements of online sex also offers an excellent opportunity to emphasise the ways that gaming can be understood as both an emotional and embodied experience.

In this section, I discuss how the spaces of online games can be used as spaces to express something akin to sexual liberation, or sexual deviancy in the spaces of online games. It is important to first provide an outline of the different types of sex. According to Brown (2012a) there are two main types of sex that can occur in online game spaces. One is simply known as 'cybersex', while the other is erotic role-play (ERP) and is typically guided by a set of ERP 'rules'. Both are similar, in that they are intended to be sexually arousing and conclude in much the same way, with an orgasm. People who are involved with erotic role-play argue that there is a significant difference between the two types of online sex, as ERP is more about exploring the depth of fictional characters and the progression of the intimate story line between virtual characters. Usually, it is governed by very clear guidelines relating to public and private codes of conduct. In contrast, cybersex simply put, is the exchange of sexually suggestive texts specifically designed for the purpose of eliciting sexual excitement between one's self and another player. While enlightening, these two definitions of how people may choose to engage in cybersex or ERP cannot be directly applied to the participants in this study. For example, cybersex is talked about as an act between two strangers just looking for a quick, 'no strings attached' encounter. ERP is viewed as more of a performance

between two people who take on roles that are a defined by their avatar's prescribed personality, cultural traits and background stories that are based in lore. Therefore, the type of emotional connection and friendship that participants refer to in this study does not fit with either of these descriptions. Consequently, I do not attempt to align their experiences with them. It is important, however, to discuss the various avenues that accommodate forms of online sex within gaming cultures.

WoW is a Teen rated (13 years and older) game and sex in WoW is typically 'frowned upon'. Also, while some games are designed to readily offer players options for engaging in online sex (such as Second Life), WoW does not. That does not mean, however, that acts of cybersex, ERP or cyber-love-making do not occur, because they do. ERP and cybersex in particular, tend to be much more noticeable on role-playing servers, such as Moonguard. Like many other online games, it is possible for players to create macros[58] in-game, which allow players to execute a series of moves by just pressing one button. WoW does not provide players with macros for sexual acts. In order to achieve this, players need to be creative and think of ways to manipulate the macro commands that they do have available. For example, if an avatar was to perform the sexual act of a "blow job", a player might create a macro using the commands, "/kneel" and "/stand". These two commands would need to be repeated in rapid succession in order to make it appear as though the kneeling avatar's head was moving quickly backward and forward.

As early as 2007, a writer for WoW Insider[59] wrote: "I've been sidestepping writing about this issue for some time, since it's bound to generate some controversy … But as the topic keeps popping up again and again, particularly on role-playing servers, it might be time to bring it out in the open" (Wachowski 2007). The article goes on to report that an erotic role-playing guild "Abhorrent Taboo", which spans

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[58] Macros are made up of lines of programmable commands. For example, if a player wanted to make their avatar lie down and sleep they would use the macro "/sleep".
[59] Established in 2005, WoW Insider is a blog and information website dedicated to covering the latest news about WoW. For further information see Joystick.com (http://wow.joystiq.com/about).

across two of WoW's realms, has been accused of defending paedophiles, as certain members of their guild community were engaging in extreme sexual situations without first verifying the age of the participating members. The guild responded to these accusations by stating that they had not violated any of Blizzard's policies. Yet, they also argued that if any minors were joining their guild and participating in ERP, it was the result of poor parenting, rather than their lack of an adequate screening process. The guild leader at the time posted a somewhat controversial welcome message on the Blackwater Raider (BWR) forum, which read:

> Role-playing is legal. Even if you are role-playing something that would be considered deplorable and highly illegal IRL [in real life], it's still just role-playing and isn't subject to any form of disciplinary action. Negative publicity is still publicity. Make a Digg [social news website] or website about how sick we are. Report us to PervertedJustice. All it does is bring in more members. In fact, the Digg the guy on Ravenholdt made about us was so effective, several people signed up for WoW just to be in our guild. The bottom line is: We're allowed to do what we do on any server we please and no one can do anything about it (cited in Wachowski 2007, unpaginated).

Abhorrent Taboo's recruitment policy (also posted into the BWR forum) states:

> NOTE: Be advised that we frequently ERP in guild chat and often engage in even potentially offensive kinks such as (Extreme) Ageplay, Bestiality, Child Birth, [something that is censored by the WoW forums so I can't tell what it is], Watersports, or any other kink those playing may wish to explore. If you are easily offended or upset by others using kinks you may not personally enjoy, this is not the guild for you. Furthermore, we are a guild based on

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freedom of love and sex. Monogamy of any kind runs counter to

this, and so, all sexually exclusive relationships are prohibited

(cited in Wachowski 2007, unpaginated).

After the negative backlash that Blizzard received from their handling of Sara Andrew's case and her openly gay guild "Oz", they were more cautious in their dealings with Abhorrent Taboo. After several public protests against the guild, however, which were being posted on several different forums, Blizzard decided to forcibly disband the guild. According to reports, the main reason was that there were insufficient measures in place to verify anyone's age in the game, and so there was no way at all to say who was a consenting adult and who was not. Shortly after being disbanded, several of the members reformed under a new guild name "Vile Anthema", and "claimed that they were no long interested in the kind of erotic roleplaying that Abhorrent Taboo championed" (Schramm 2008, unpaginated). A fresh search of Blizzard's database shows that the new guild is no longer in existence – at least, not under that particular name. Unlike many other ERP guilds, Abhorrent Taboo did little to minimise their presence and purpose on their servers. Most other ERP guilds, however, attempt to remain "under the radar" and exclusive to their own members. It is with guilds such as these that Brown (2012a, 206) argues for a separate system of game-play – one with its own "rules and goals separate to those of World of Warcraft", where ERPers can create and enforce rules that primarily aim to protect them from others who would otherwise disrupt, expose, or mock their style of play.

The most common reports of erotica in WoW occur in role-playing servers, specifically in a location called Goldshire (commonly referred to as Pornshire). Goldshire is a small town set in the Alliance province of Elwynn Forest, near Stormwind city (see Figure 6.3) and located on the continent of the Eastern Kingdoms. While most ERP guilds are private, the town of Goldshire is not. Goldshire is an open location and anyone playing in this realm is able to visit the area. No one really knows how it started, or why Goldshire became the prominent

location for cybersex but over the past few years YouTube alone has accumulated thousands of video clips that have been posted by players visiting Lion's Pride Inn (see Figure 6.4) in Goldshire to witness, or experience online sex for themselves. In this sense, sex in an online space completely disregards any notion of privacy, as the acts occurring with the Goldshire Inn are for everyone and anyone to see.

In Chapter 4, I discuss various aspects of non-hetero identities and how they must negotiate the public spaces of online gaming, however, here in the online/public space of Goldshire sexual acts between various avatars take place, including performances of gay and lesbian sex. As noted by Hubbard (2001, 51), "the transgression of sexual 'dissidents' into public spaces can challenge the naturalization of heterosexual norms". Hubbard (2001, 62) also explains that "by making dissident sexualities visible, the queering of public space reminds people that sexual 'others' have claims to citizenship alongside 'good' heterosexual subjects".

Ashford (2009, 303) notes that a useful tool for analysing the sex as a virtual performance that is public (similar to that occurring with Goldshire Inn), is Foucault's concept of panoptic surveillance. Ashford continues:

> Panoptic prison plans, in which the few observe the many, have been inverted by the emergence of the Internet. Sex in the virtual environment may be discussed and engaged in by the minority but now the majority are able to look in, lurk, and observe the behaviours of these groups … The virtual sex environment is one specific forum in which cyber-sex and these cyber-sexualities can be explored.

**Figure 6.3: Map of the Elwynn Forest in Eastern Kingdoms. © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**



**Figure 6.4: Goldshire's Lion's Pride Inn. Caption in picture translates to read as "Looking for any men with any dick size". © Blizzard Entertainments 2014**

In 2010, a father posted an angry comment about the activities occurring in Goldshire, stating that his son would no longer be allowed to play WoW and he

was cancelling his subscription due to Blizzard's "absolute lack of server/ToS follow up" (Terms of Service[60]). In his post, the father states:

Not that it will matter, as I'm sure I'll get trolled, but I wanted to drop a line, as I did in the cancellation box, that I cancelled my son's account. He's 15, and I've found him to be very trustworthy. We allow him access to play usually 1-2 hours a night, max, if he chooses.

Tonight, he had some friends over for the night. When it came time to wrap it up, I went into the comp room to find my son and his friends huddled over the monitor, laughing like school boys will.

Apparantly, they had heard about and discovered Goldshire Inn on Moon Guard. I myself had heard of its reputation, but after scrolling up and reading the chat, I never thought it was as bad as I was reading.

I cannot begin to tell you how displeased I am with the absolute lack of server/ToS follow up regarding this abominable server. Line after line, having absolutely NOTHING to do with RP: sexual emotes, gay bashing, racial comments ... I sat there speechless.

And please don't tell me about the ignore button, I am well aware of that feature. The fact that this behavior goes on CONSTANTLY on this server is disgusting, and I will not allow my son to "discover" any more servers such as this.

I understand that this is a T for Teen game. However, as I said, we trust our son, and playing WoW is a reward for his good grades in school. We have all parental features enabled. I took screenshots, but there's no point in sending them because I'm sure they will be disregarded.

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[60] See, http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/about/termsofuse.html

As a paying customer for 6 years now, I just wanted to voice my extreme displeasure regarding this disgusting server. IMO [in my opinion], it should be shut down.

T for Teen is one thing. What goes on in Goldshire on Moon Guard is apalling and beyond offensive.

Both my wife and I are very sorry to punish our son by cancelling his account, as this really wasn't his fault. However, we cannot allow our son access to a game that is not monitored for the very rules you so vehemently say you enforce.

Thank you for your time.

As this parent notes, the text language in public chat can become somewhat 'x-rated', especially when players can easily circumvent the auto-scrambling of words such as 'fuck' simply by typing in the word 'fuk' or 'fcuk', and so it is easy to see how some of the public comments being posted could become extremely 'x-rated'. Shortly after, the forum post by this father (above) received a lot of attention from various media sources and other forum posters, and as a result, Blizzard was prompted to once again take action. In this instance, Blizzard announced that they would begin patrolling the "Goldshire Inn on Moon Guard on a regular basis and take appropriate action against any gamers violating the Harassment Policy" (Parrish 2010, unpaginated). Nevertheless, Blizzard also made a point of stating "that this pertains primarily to public messages (/say, /yell, General) and unsolicited whispers … We won't be showing up with that mythical crack of lightning—we'll just be watching silently for any rule-breaking language and following up privately with the player[s] in question" (cited in Parrish 2010, unpaginated). In other words, it is acceptable for avatars to perform sexual acts and be seen doing it, as long as the actual text conversation remains private. In this research, I did not specifically set out to examine ERP within the context of gaming, however, some of my own experiences in WoW have involved unsolicited sexual advances, which include being licked, blown kisses and whistled at by other players. For example, on one occasion I was involved in a Looking For Group

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(LFG)[61] raid instance where I made a flirtatious comment to another player. I jokingly asked him not to perform his 'sexy' blood elf dance in front of the boss we were about to kill. By way of response, this player invited me to take a ride on his disco stick.[62]

Turkle (1995) argues that online environments have the ability to offer people the option of re-imagining their 'self' as online representations, as well as exploring new aspects of their identity. While these re-imaginings are possible, they are not always accepted, as they may be viewed as transgressions according to the dominant norms that exist within certain spaces. Take, for example, Jenny who I mentioned in the previous chapter, who made particular reference to gender-switching as a covert performance of gender and sexuality (that was, at times, difficult and challenging to negotiate). She also discussed why she was unwilling to 'come out' as a bisexual woman and what that would mean for the romantic relationships she had forged (as a virtual man) with other virtual women. Similarly, there is an obvious demand for role-play servers by gamers who appreciate the extensive interactions that are 'part and parcel' of role-play gaming. For example, Luckman, a leader of a raiding guild on the role-playing Moon Guard server effectively sums this up, stating:

> Unlike other servers, people can easily create communities here that have nothing to do with raiding or dungeons … One of the things I've always liked about Moon Guard is that people can role-play as much as they want to, or as much as they don't want to. If you don't feel like it, no one's going to force you (cited in Parrish 2010, unpaginated).

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[61] LFGs are made up of players across one server network, who queue to take part in an instance. Groups are mostly made up of random players who have not worked together previously as a team, and as a result there is often a lot of miscommunication and arguing that occurs.
[62] This particular comment refers to an invitation to have sex.

As is evident from the findings of this research, players in online relationships can and do participate in cybersex or ERP. As mentioned earlier, however, while the participants in this study did engage in online sex, it would be inaccurate to align their activities with the standard definitions of 'cybersex' and 'ERP'. Essentially, the standards used to define ERP and cybersex do not encompass the depth of emotion and connection that the participants of this research shared with their online partners. With that in mind, it would be reasonable to say that what participants in this study have described is more akin to 'cyber love-making'. Yet, not all online relationships have positive outcomes, and as with some offline relationships, infidelity can sometimes be an issue, which I discuss in more detail in the following section.

**Online infidelity: "She was married at the time, I always thought happily"**

Intimate online relationships are a growing social and cultural phenomenon. A recent study by Kolotkin *et al.* (2012, 1) examining online relationships in the game Second Life shows that people engaging in online relationships while already committed to an offline partner, are "extremely prevalent (81.7%)" (from a total of 236 participants). Kolotkin *et al.* also contend that both men and women are "highly satisfied with their virtual intimate relationships", and that no offline relationship was "found to be significantly more satisfying than any SL relationship in any statistical analysis conducted".

In this research, I did not set out to examine participants' online relationships with regard to the topic of 'cybercheating', however, it was a topic that was raised by six participants, who stated that at some point they (or the person they were involved with) had cheated on their current partners (both online and offline). Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 185) argues that talks between people involved in online relationships are both intensely emotional and sexual. In Chapter 5 I discussed the relationships of several participants (such as Matt and Regina, and Jenny and Paul), however, these participants also mentioned that they were already in a relationship when they became involved with their current partners. Both Jenny and Paul, for

example, were already involved in relationships with people in their real lives or offline lives. Similarly, Regina was involved in a relationship with another gamer when she began to develop an intimate connection with Matt. During the progression of their relationship, Regina's now ex-boyfriend remained associated with them and a member of the same guild. At first, they decided to keep their relationship a secret, and hid it not only from him but also from the majority of their friends online and offline:

> Cherie: When you did finally start being together as a couple, did you act like a couple in WoW?
>
> Regina: We actually at first kind of hid it from people.
>
> Matt: Mainly because of your ex.
>
> Regina: It wasn't that we were worried about him being angry or anything like that. It's just after we split up I was actually still friends with him. And I was slightly concerned that he would be … being a rather sensitive person, would feel hurt about it. Or I mean, I suppose in hindsight, it was rather stupid, given how much he hurt me but I don't know, I guess I cared about how he felt. So that was the main reason, and then of course when a couple of Aussie friends came over …
>
> Matt: I think we told a couple of people but we kept it generally very quiet.
>
> Regina: But then we had one Aussie friend come over [for] a business trip, so we got together one evening. Went to the city, to a bar and got to meet him for the first time, and obviously because we were together 'the cat was out of the bag'. So from there and kind of after, we didn't really bother trying to hide it anymore.
>
> (Matt and Regina, interviewees, October 2010)

My conversation with Matt and Regina provides an example of how careful online couples may need to be if they want to keep their relationship private and hidden from not only online friends and communities but also from offline friends. Although Regina had no reason to feel guilty for being in a new relationship, she cared enough about her ex-partner to not want to hurt his feelings by openly advertising her new relationship. While Regina was careful not to cross any lines regarding issues of infidelity, not all people chose this route. For example, there is a rapidly growing body of knowledge across various academic disciplines, and in areas such as addiction services and relationship counselling, that examine the topic of online infidelity (also see, Döring 2000; Griffiths 2001; Whitty 2003).

As highlighted by Whitty (2005), some people do not perceive online infidelity as being harmful to their existing relationships, as they tend to view online affairs as fictional and therefore, not real. There are, however, many who do consider acts such as onlinesex to have "as serious an impact on the couple as a traditional offline affair" (Whitty 2005, 57). There are also internet users who are open with their offline partners about their online affairs. Some even go so far as to allow their offline partners to witness their sexual activities while they are occurring on the screen (Ben'Ze-ev 2004). Similarly, in these situations a line is typically drawn between the 'real' and the 'digital', and where the online relationship is rationalised as being 'unreal' (Whitty and Carr 2005). Whether or not these online relationships stay that way is uncertain, as the internet users involved in them often experience intensely emotional relationships that sometimes lead to a deeper level of involvement, as with Jenny and Paul, who fell-in-love and wanted a more exclusive commitment with one another, eventually leaving their offline partners so that they could be together (also see, Helsper and Whitty 2010; Woods 2008). Participants often reflected on the unexpected nature of how their online relationships formed. Take, for example, the following comment made by Clive, a 44 year old information technician from the U.S., who while playing WoW, met and fell in-love with a married woman and mother of five children:

I met my current fiancée on WoW about a year ago. She (and her 5 kids!) recently moved in with me about 3 months ago. We have actually known each other on WoW for about a year but did not get involved till roughly 6 months ago … Anyway, [she] was one of the guildies that I played with frequently. We had a lot of fun levelling, talking, joking around. She would talk about the things going on in her life, and vice-versa. She was married at the time, I always thought happily. I suppose this was what attracted me to her. She is funny, a tough "Jersey girl", we always talked about things and flirted a little. I suppose everything was better with her around. :-) Roughly six months ago, [she] started opening up more about her private life; issues with her current marriage, children, and so forth … One day she was particularly depressed about her marriage and was suffering from a migraine. I offered her a ride on my rocket (the two-seater mount) as she was having trouble playing with her migraine. She accepted and I just flew all over the Eastern Kingdom, around mountains, rivers, basically a relaxing ride. Two days later she told me flat out she was interested in me. :-) From there on we just talked more and more, finding out more about each other [and] friended on Facebook. Probably a week or so later we were talking daily via webcam. [She] made a trip out [to California] 4 months ago and spent a week with me. And she and kids moved in a month later. :-) We are happier than ever! Planning for marriage next year. Oh yes, we both still play WoW daily! I'm not religious, but everything just seemed to magically fall in place for our relationship. It is enough to make me wonder!

(Clive, online participant, October 2011)

Couples often consider the experience of "getting to know each other online [to] be an almost spiritual enterprise in which a deeper and purer kind of interaction takes place" (Ben-Ze'ev 2004, 29). Often the intensity of love online leads those who

fall in love to view their meeting as a miracle, or evidence of the fact that destiny has played a part in bringing them together, as evident in Clive's comment above. The emotions shared between people in online spaces are often emotionally charged and intensely felt, and there is every possibility that an online relationship can move from being a strictly online experience, to a relationship in the real-world. In this particular instance, the couple's feelings for one another were strong enough to end a long-term marriage and move their online relationship into the real-world.

Ben-Ze'ev (2004) argues that intimate online relationships that begin as profound friendships are more likely to thrive and continue to be successful than offline relationships. Similarly, Yee (2006a, unpaginated) found that "not only do virtual worlds make 'impossible relationships' possible, but many respondents argued that the process itself provides much stronger foundations for a long-term relationship than is typical in [face-to-face] relationships". The findings from this research concur with both Ben-Ze'ev (2004) and Yee (2006), as all of the participants who continued their relationships offline reported not only having very deep and intense connections with their online partners but also that this intense connection was sustained and continued well into their offline relationship. Whitty (2005, 114) explains that internet relationships and online erotic interactions can and do have a 'real' impact on offline relationships, stating:

> Despite the lack of real bodies in cyberspace, online affairs can
> have a real impact on the offline relationship… Given the nature of
> cyberspace, individuals might be more easily able to rationalize
> their online betrayals, however, this does not necessarily make the
> betrayal any less severe.

With this in mind, other participants also had their own stories to tell of meeting and falling-in-love with someone. John, a 23 year old student from NZ, for

example, describes how his friendship with another online gamer grew into something more, even though he was already in a long-term offline relationship:

> I was involved in a serious relationship with someone from the US (I'm in NZ) who I met through WoW. I was 19, she was 25. We both posted on a set of gaming-related forums, where a bunch of us decided to start a new guild along with an upcoming server release. At this point I didn't know anything about her, any more than I did most of the random people posting on that forum. Even once the guild was formed and we started playing 'together'. I don't think I had any direct contact with her for a long time … after a few weeks we started playing together more regularly, along with a group of maybe a dozen people. All of us would talk on Ventrilo (similar to Skype) while playing, and we started to become friends with one another. It wasn't until there was some guild-related drama that we actually began to speak with one another regularly. A friend of hers did some stuff that he shouldn't have in game, and was kicked from the guild. I mentioned in Ventrilo that I never wanted to hear from him again, and she left in a huff. Knowing that she was friends with him, I sent her an email later apologising for being callous, and explaining myself better.
>
> (John, online participant, December 2010)

John went on to explain that there was nothing romantic at this point between them, and that he was already in a relationship of nearly two years, and "had no intentions of pursuing anything with this new girl (let's call her [Pamela])". They continued to send emails to one another and also started to talk more in-game, which in turn led to gaming with each other on more of a daily basis:

We both worked jobs in which we had computer access, and we eventually started chatting to one another while at work. We became closer and closer. It stated to become apparent to me that I was developing feelings for her, beyond friendship. I felt a huge amount of guilt about this as I still had a girlfriend. But it made me examine my current relationship, and realise that I wasn't *really* happy. [Pamela] was intelligent, funny, easy to talk to, and she obviously shared interests with me. We ended up declaring our feelings for one another, which made my current relationship even more problematic. I eventually broke up with my old girlfriend (obviously).

(John, online participant, December 2010)

As this chapter demonstrates, it is easy to form bonds with others in an online gaming environment, especially as all of these burgeoning relationships begin first and foremost as friendships. Not only do gamers automatically have one thing in common [playing games] but the game itself provides a virtual body and digital world for them to inhabit and utilise in a variety of ways while they get to know one another. Sometimes, however, these promising new relationships do not always work out, as the following participant Victor, a 26 year old resource consultant from the USA explains:

[We] met in WoW through random heroic running and horde ganking back in BC [Burning Crusade expansion]. [I] think she was a Night Elf chick... lol go figure and I was human. Both from US, 4 states away. She sounded extremely sexy in vent [Ventrilo]. [We] ended up sharing the old Myspace info and that's when it started. We talked on the phone a lot and continued playing the game together. We wanted to meet IRL [in real-life] but never could... I'm damn happy that we didn't. lol that girl was freakin crazy! I found out through her 'blogs' I guess, and her friend that she hung out

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with a lot. She has some serious mental issues and since we never met IRL, it was time to cut the cord on that, lol. Also got a phone call from her apparent boyfriend at the time that she was happily with someone the whole time me and her were talking, and he made many threats... all in one voicemail. So no, I don't talk to any chicks online like that anymore... ever. I have to actually know them IRL or have met with them before I start getting involved. My current girl and I play WoW together and have been doing so for 3 years. I didn't meet her through WoW but got her to start playing it when we started talking and she hasn't stopped since. The one and only time I tried to talk to a chick through WoW, the one I mentioned earlier, was the first and last time I will ever do that again. L*et al*one there is no physical involvement in the relationship. And how the hell could anyone trust somebody that they don't even know IRL or even get to meet face to face? Even if I wasn't with my current girlfriend, I still wouldn't even consider going through the WoW relationship thing again.

(Victor, online participant, October 2011)

As Victor's comment illustrates, online relationships between gamers can sometimes begin positive but end on a more negative note. Often another element of online gaming is being able to hear other gamers' voices via ICT applications such as Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, or Skype. In a recent study, Williams *et al.* (2007) found that there was an increase in trust and liking when gamers were able to talk directly to each other. Saying that someone had a "sexy voice" was one of the most common phrases used by participants in this study. Victor and several other participants in this study, however, express a mistrust of intimate online relationships, where they now prefer to meet potential partners offline, rather than in the game.

Wilkinson's (2009) work highlights critical discussions that problematise normative notions of love and challenges neo-conservative discourse that positions the value of monogamous love above all other kinds of love. Nadia, for example, is a research participant who plays WoW and identifies as lesbian. She described to me a friendship she formed with another male player, a married heterosexual man while gaming in WoW:

> I met him online about two years ago and he was very upfront about the fact that he was married. I was very upfront about the fact that I was gay but neither of those things stopped him from you know, I mean he's just the kind of guy who likes to think of himself as a ladies' man … and so there was an awful lot of flirting that went on, and in my mind it was a game because I'm playing a *game*, right? So it was very clear in my mind that there was a boundary there and that we were *not* going to run away together, which is what he decided he was going to do when his wife went to Russia to see her mother for two weeks and take the kid.

Nadia went on to say, "he also suggested that we could travel around the North Island and I could show him all the sites". She managed, however, to convince her online friend that she was in fact going to be incredibly busy during those two weeks and unfortunately, if he came to visit she would be unable to see him:

> So I managed to deter his very intense desire to come and meet me, and he was convinced that if we met, we would hit it off, and that I would be his future ex-wife. I mean, he's already emphasising the X part ... It was fun when he first started, you know, trying to do things beyond [friendship] because he was convinced that I am the love of his life or whatever, but it just got really bizarre. After one night playing he ended up sending me a completely unsolicited photo of himself completely naked to my Facebook page and [as

punishment] I had to ban him from any internet contact for a month until he calmed down … But yes, I still play with him and he's still convinced that if we ever met he would be leaving his wife and marrying me.

Döring (2002, 337) argues that "romantic net relationships neither represent an exotic fringe phenomenon, nor an epidemic mass phenomenon. Instead, net relationships are an experience that belong to the everyday life of a considerable portion of an exponentially growing net population." The following discussion occurred with Deb, a 25 year old customer service manager living in the Philippines, who experienced love, as well as heartbreak when her online partner left her for another online gamer:

> Deb: [We met in a raid … I was the healer and he was the tank …
> [He lives in] Australia and [I live in the] Philippines. [I was
> attracted to] his humour and smile. We started exchanging
> messages on MSN, which later then progress[ed] to phone
> calls and text messages and then web cam sessions later on.
>
> Cherie: Did you meet in real-life?
>
> Deb: No. Our jobs were not accommodating for us to make it
> happen then.
>
> Cherie: Are you still friends, or more than friends today?
>
> Deb: We still talk but not as close as before. He just says hi every
> now and then … We were together for 2 and a half years
> (phone calls, text messages, cam sessions kept us together),
> we processed my [visa] papers so I could go and be with
> him in Australia for a year or two before we go further in
> our relationship. [But] five weeks before my papers were
> ready - he found someone else. During that time, I was not
> very active on wow anymore since I was too busy with
> work and they had this guild gathering one time and [he]

met this girl who he hangs out a lot in game with and [he] ended up hooking up with her. He never had the guts to tell me, I had to figure it all out by myself when the phone calls (he used to call every night to put me to bed) started to fade.

(Deb, online participant, October 2011)

In this particular instance, Deb's experience of losing her online partner (that she herself met online) to someone else online left her feeling heartbroken. She elaborates:

Spending too much time in a game then with a person would evolve into something, it will make you think of a lot of things. Will make you realize that no matter where that person is across the globe that love is possible. A connection with someone in a game that you put your heart and time into, is strong and powerful and something that cannot be ignored, as a gamer it is great to be in a relationship with someone who can understand your jargon, your excitement/frustration about the game and your addiction but if that person is someone you cannot touch and only long for and hope and wish for to be with, then be cautious. A person's heart can only take so much, being in love with someone too far away is just heartbreaking.

(Deb, online participant, October 2011)

As an online gamer, Deb's experience demonstrates how people can become emotionally invested, as well as highlighting some of the complexities associated with trying to maintain an online relationship when two people live so far apart. In Deb's case, it is possible to see how the emotions experienced during the course of an online relationship can be profoundly felt. Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) state that various theorists have generated much discussion on the negative

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aspects of online relationships, such as choosing to emphasise the ways in which they may impact upon offline relationships. Consequently, these examinations typically ignore how some online settings can be of benefit to online relationships, such as how they can provide new and unique avenues for socialising with other people. Similarly, others commonly deconstruct online affairs as situations that only negatively impact upon offline partners (Hertlein and Sendak 2007). Not only does this disregard the fact that another online user is emotionally involved but it also excludes the possibility that the people involved in the relationship dynamic may not know each other at all offline but well as online personas.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have discussed how various kinds of gendered power relations are constructed in WoW's online gaming culture and how these affect gamers' relationships, both online and offline. Sex and gender stereotyping and how they are linked to online violence, misogyny and cybercheating within games have been explored in the chapter. It is important to highlight these hegemonies of online games as they have a significant impact on the ways in which both men and women think about sex and gender, which in turn affects how they interact with others, and perform their own identities in an online space. Women in games are typically visually constructed and portrayed as hypersexualised, and recast into traditional roles that portray them as powerless and submissive, all of which works to enhance their subjective positioning as inconsequential sexual objects. Authors, such as Yee (2014) discuss the ways in which negativity that is aimed at women by some male players originates from the hyper-masculine culture that prevails in online games. A negative outcome of this is that it reinforces a culture that excludes anyone who is 'other'. The media debate currently taking place regarding female game critics and other women working within the industry reflects a need for change, as gaming culture continues to reinforce patriarchal values that maintain hostile attitudes towards women.

There are those who would argue that games are meant to be fun, and for many people, 'fun' is derived from the social element of online games, and is often the driving motivational factor behind why they choose spend their time gaming. It is important to note, however, that while all of these interactions are occurring in digital space, they are in no way removed from patriarchal relations, and there are many times when a game ceases to be fun, due to factors such as sexism, misogyny and verbal abuse. As highlighted by McCaughey *et al*. (2001), cultural standards continue to equate being a woman with non-violence and nurturing. WoW, however, is a game that is based on the concept of 'war', where player achievement and success is directly linked to acts of aggression and killing. In WoW this is contextualised within a highlight masculinist discourse that women gamers must negotiate in order to make progress in the game.

Quinn (2002, 386), rightly points out that flirtation and sexual advances are viewed differently by men and women, stating that "one of the more robust findings in sexual harassment research" is that "women tend to see harassment where men see harmless fun or normal gendered interaction". Yet, women are not always in a position to resist or challenge what is occurring, and if they are, then it is common for the validity of their experiences to be minimised and put down to just harmless fun. In many ways, negotiating my own space and place within an online culture that is, at times, exclusionary, elitist, sexist and misogynistic, has somewhat become part of the everyday norm. Sex in online games can and does occur and I draw on both literature and research data in order to offer a closer examination of the ways in which online sex and gaming can be understood as both emotional and embodied experiences. While several of the participants in this study do not strictly adhere to the standard definitions of cybersex and ERP, they have in their own ways experienced online sex while gaming in WoW. Turkle (1995) argues that people have more opportunities in online environments to re-imagine their virtual representations of 'self', as well as exploring new aspects of their identity. Although these re-imaginings are possible, they may not always be accepted, as

they are sometimes seen as performances of transgression that are not aligned with existing dominant norms.

Relationships that evolve in an online environment are now considered to be common-place, and as such there is a growing body of research that examines these relationships, as well as the phenomenon of cybercheating. The internet has become a new avenue for people to experience different ways of being and types of relationships, hence the internet is commonly thought of as an 'unsafe' space that has the potential to destroy offline relationships due to online infidelities (Whitty and Joinson 2009). The topic of infidelity was discussed, as several participants noted how they impacted others, or were impacted themselves by an element of infidelity when it arose in their relationships. For example, for several participants, the emotional connections made were strong and intense enough for them to fall in love and prompt either one or both of them to end their relationships with their offline partners at the time. While some do not perceive of their online infidelity as being harmful to offline partners due to it being strictly online and therefore fictional, others definitely perceived of their actions as hurtful and damaging to their offline relationships that they were currently involved in (Whitty 2005). Others choose to be open with their offline partners about their online affairs and some involve their offline partners by allowing them to witness the sexual activities that are unfolding on the screen (Ben'Ze-ev 2004). In these situations, however, a distinction is made between 'real' and 'virtual', and the online relationship is rationalised as being purely fictional and therefore, acceptable (Whitty and Carr 2005). Whether or not these online relationships stay that way is uncertain, as the participants in this study often reflected on the unexpected nature of how their online relationships formed and surprised themselves with the level of intensity and emotional connection they felt.

# CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

It has been approximately five years since I first began playing WoW and I am still playing. From a gamer's perspective, I have gone from being a 'newbie' to now being a considerably more experienced player; and from a research perspective, I have gone from feeling like an 'outsider' (a researcher) to now mostly feeling like an 'insider' (part of a community). During the course of this study these subjective positionings have fluctuated, with both the researcher and gamer always present, and I have developed several unexpected but close friendships with other gamers. This thesis examines how WoW gamers 'do' sex and gender, with a particular focus on: how gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW; what kinds of intimate and loving relationships gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond; and what kinds of gendered power relations are constructed in WoW's online gaming culture and how these affect gamers' relationships both online and offline. This research draws on the experiences of 57 participants and autoethnography, and presents in-depth findings regarding gendered relationships in WoW.

While most online spaces can afford people the opportunity of remaining anonymous, this was not my experience, as the ethical principles guiding the study leant towards an 'overt' approach to conducting research. Therefore, I had to learn to navigate these online spaces as a researcher/woman gamer, which also meant charting a path between conducting critical, in-depth and ethical research whilst maintaining a professional persona, and being a 'fun' person who 'shrugs off' flirtatious advantages, and 'inappropriate' or sexualised comments. As feminist methodological practices suggest, it is important to have critical awareness of research relationships and the power relations working within them (Alice 1999; Ogborn *et al.* 2014). Yet, there are few literary guidelines that pay attention to power and subjectivity in relation to feminist methodologies when researching online environments (Madge 2007; Morrow *et al.* 2014). The idea that WoW creates and hosts dynamic and complex cultures is a constant theme within this thesis. As

Morrow *et al.* (2014, 1) point out, the imaginary of digital spaces as immense tracts of untapped data is "at odds with our own experiences of these spaces as virtual yet still material extension of our everyday lives that shape our research subjectivities, the kinds of questions we ask, and our relationships to both data and online subjects". Therefore, the few guidelines relating to feminist ethics and geographical lens that are available have been utilised in order to maintain a reflexive and reciprocal approach while conducting online research (Madge 2007; Moss 2002, 2005; Rose 2007).

In this last chapter I revisit the research questions and reflect critically upon the research methodology, including my own positionality as a researcher/gamer. I then summarise my findings and finally, I provide suggestions for future research. In short, the areas of discussion that stand out include the connections between online and offline bodies/personas which provide a critical discussion on the politics of gender and sexuality in online games, and where LGBTQ, women and other minority identities occupy a space within the margins of online gaming culture. The depth and breadth of friendships and intimate relationships are highlighted, with discussions focusing on the ways in which they are expressed as embodied and *felt* experiences. I provide an examination of WoW, and by extension gaming culture, as spaces of exclusion and alienation towards not only women (and non-heterosexuals) who game but also women within the gaming industry (who are either involved in game design and production, or who produce critiques of game designs). All of these affect how women must learn to navigate relationships within an online culture that is dominated by patriarchal values. This thesis shows that sex and infidelity play a role in online relationships, which further aids in emphasising the ways in which gaming can be understood as both an emotional and embodied experience. Also, interwoven throughout all of these discussions are my autoethnographic experiences which (as a form of self-narrative that works to place the 'self' within the social context) have played a crucial role in helping inform the research.

As research shows, the number of people choosing to opt out of offline activities in order to spend time within online game environments is increasing every year (McGonigal 2011). Consequently, game designers argue that game development exists in a transformative state asserting that it has become ubiquitous and bigger than TV (GamePlanet.co.nz 2014). MMORPGs are designed to operate with representational and affective elements of game-play. Immersive digital landscapes such as WoW are designed to evoke experiential (affectual) responses from players, and a crucial component of contemporary game design involves the addition of content that promotes player immersion and emotion. As such, the spatiality of video games like WoW are purposely designed to actively constrain, enable and contextualise players' activities and perspectives (Shaw and Warf 2009). In their study of WoW, Shaw and Warf (2009, 5) demonstrate how the spatiality of games is important to consider when conducting analytical examinations, as the "increasing sophistication of [3D] virtual worlds has given rise to pressing sexual, social, and political issues, all of which have affective consequences". Games are typically driven by competitive objectives, where players must either try to out 'perform' the game, or one another. Furthermore, the platform for hosting multiplayer games over the internet allows gamers to connect and form groups even when they are located in different countries. The competitive nature of games, like WoW, employ marketing campaigns that promote a masculinist gaming culture. As Shaw and Warf (2009, 6) note, "in the vast bulk of video games, aggression, violence, war, and physical prowess are the standards by which the success or failure of players is judged".

There are many positive elements of gaming, such as the ways in which games can be understood as constructive and empowering, including how they improve a person's cognitive abilities, including their ability to problem solve, multitask, and engage in cooperative team work (McGonical 2011; Sarkeesian 2013). There is also, however, the masculinist discourse of most games to consider, which affects the way that some gamers engage with these spaces and how far they are willing to

portray identities that transgress dominant values and norms, or experiment with different ways of being (Bertozzi 2008; Eklund 2011; Shaw 2012a).

Sex and gender in WoW is discussed in relation to how it is portrayed via game design, and how it is performed by gamers. Here I utilise Butler's (1993) work to highlight how performances of sex and gender are connected to citational practices that re-produce, as well as subvert knowledges and discourses. Butler (1993, 94) argues that continually re-cited bodies demonstrate both normative and transgressive acts through the "forced reiteration of norms". The performative aspects of gamer identity are complex, however, it is these performances that bring the digital environment of WoW into being, and it is in this flux of potential performances where social meanings are disrupted and where different identities become possible (minus the social repercussions that would otherwise occur offline and outside of WoW). It is important to emphasise that while WoW shows potential, it is not a 'free' space, as there are limitations for gamers with minority status who must contend with patriarchal power relations. In short, the theory utilised in this thesis has been useful in enabling me to show how the digital spaces of WoW are performative spaces where players can conform, or resist, the dominant values and norms, and where the subjective experiences of gamers 'blend' with their offline identities.

Throughout this thesis, participants' performative experiences highlight the two-way, mutually constitutive relationship between online and offline identities. It is reasonable, for instance, to assume that a person's offline persona would influence how they choose to portray themselves and perform their identities in online spaces. What is not so obvious is how the online bodies and identities that people create and communicate with affect their own relationships and perceptions of 'self' in offline environments, with recent research showing that socialising within online spaces is a strong motivational factor for many gamers and that this can also increase a person's sense of self-confidence (Cole and Griffiths 2007; Trepte *et al.* 2012).

In Chapter 3, for example, I discuss the methodology used to conduct this research. One of the more important points to come out of the discussion was how my attempts to circulate information about the study and recruit participants actually ended up becoming an unexpected source of information gathering. This was due to the discussions that occurred after the research was advertised within multiple online forums. In relation to my autoethnographic encounters, it was here that I first experienced what it was like to have an online presence and actively engage with others in that space. In hindsight, these first interactions (on my part) were subdued, yet over the past several years I have changed the ways in which I participate in online spaces. I find, for example, that I am more confident and self-assured, as I am less inclined to worry if someone else disagrees with me, or acts like a 'troll' and verbally abuses me. While advertising this research within online forums, a lot of flirtatious comments were directed at me. Perhaps if I had been familiar with online gaming culture I might have foreseen or expected this outcome, but I was not. This was my first experience of having to negotiate my position as a feminist researcher and woman gamer, which involved navigating my way through a landscape dominated by masculinist and heteronormative discourses.

In examining how gamers construct and perform their sexed and gendered identities in WoW, Chapter 4 discusses how earlier scholars theorise online space as almost limitless in its potential to experience new ways of being. As the chapter progresses, I critique these notions arguing that the supposedly unlimited freedom for self-representation in online spaces is always contextual (Laukkanen 2007). In many ways, the places of online games act as transitional space between online and offline worlds, where gamers are accustomed to navigating the two-way mutually constituted relationship between both worlds (Hansbury 2011). In thinking about the various components that make up experiences of online gaming, this research pays particular attention to the themes of gender and sexuality, bodies, queer identity and heteronormativity.

This is followed by an examination of the ways in which gender, sexuality, and bodies are constructed in online games and how dominant cultural discourse affects the portrayal and performance of identity in ways that realise both the oppressive and liberating elements of online culture. In WoW, gamers are provided with a diverse array of options when they go about constructing the visual appearance of their avatar. This in turn, affects how some gamers relate, or connect with, their online identities. Game designers are increasingly providing gamers with expanding options for the portrayal of their avatars (such as the recent inclusion of transmogrification in WoW). Also, these advances in 3D graphic imagery enhance player's perceptions of game-play in ways that are intended to evoke emotional and affectual responses.

Gender is a fluid concept within gaming culture, yet due to the dominance of heteronormative discourse in WoW, the diversity of gender is typically overlooked. Instead it tends to be 'fixed' within a patriarchal binary. There is, however, a growing body of research that enhances our understanding of gender diversity in online environments. Gamers have been experiencing acts such as gender-switching in online games since the 1990s, and although to some (particularly non-gamers) it might seem to transgress gender norms, the consistent use of gender-switching by gamers means that it is a normalised practice within gaming culture. Yet, it is also important to note that there are still some examples which are viewed as transgressive, even by gamers. For example, when Matt and Regina decided to wed in WoW, several of their guests commented and/or made jokes about the gender of their avatars, as they were both female.

Most gamers have played as a different gender at some point, yet heterosexuality maintains a dominant position even in the spaces of online games and as a consequence, minority sexual identities (such as LGBTQ) are often marginalised and made to feel 'out of place' within mainstream gaming culture. In this instance, the politics around sexuality and sexual identities in offline spaces are reflected

and reinforced in these online spaces, which is evident in the 'everyday' use of homophobic language within online games. As highlighted by Gunkel and Gunkel (2009), the term 'MMORPG' is not only difficult to say but it also identifies a complex technology that is difficult to define, with research (Bertozzi and Lee 2007; Kaye and Bryce 2012; Shaw and Warf 2009) now showing that for many people these 'games' are actually much more than just fun and games.

While gaming may be dominated by patriarchal values, gamers who experience forms of marginalisation are finding ways to resist and challenge further oppression, such as creating guilds that welcome diversity and difference. This is not to say that these spaces do not exhibit their own forms of identity politics and power relations but often they are established in order to create 'safe' places for like-minded community members to come back to, especially when other spaces of online gaming seem oppressive and full of prejudice. Developers are also becoming increasingly aware of gamer diversity and continue to adjust their governance over games, including the amending of policies and other 'Terms of Use' definitions that encourage a more inclusive gaming environment for all players.

There are those who argue that games are meant to be fun and as such, arguments (like those presented in this thesis) that relate to inequality and marginalisation only work to tarnish the imaginary ideal of a gaming landscape. Yet, marginalised identities, such as women and LGBTQ gamers must navigate these landscapes in order to resist and overcome various social issues, such as sexism, homophobia and transphobia. As noted by Quinn (2002), men and women understand flirtation and sexual advances differently, and where women typically view these advances as harassment, men tend to see them as harmless acts of fun or normal gendered interactions. Women and LGBTQ gamers, however, are not always able to challenge dominant discourses, and when they do, their concerns are often joked about, ridiculed, and marginalised.

The social environment of WoW can and does affect the friendships and intimate relationships that are formed within those spaces. As this research shows, some gamers experience intimate and loving relationships that evolve in WoW's online environment. Yet, I also argue that most gamers experience multiple connections and profound friendships within these same networks. Therefore, Chapter 5 examines the kinds of intimate and loving relationships that gamers establish and maintain in WoW and beyond. In online relationships, intimacy and self-disclosure often go hand-in-hand and this was certainly evident with several participants. This research builds upon geographical discussions of online games and geographies of emotion and affect, as these elements are experienced by gamers within the relationships they form within cultural landscape of online games.

Intimate online relationships are reported to be intense with a high level of self-disclosure regardless of geographical distance, and other elements that would normally act as obstacles in offline situations (such as age difference, ethnic diversity and separate social networks). This particular finding was common among participants, as their intimate and loving relationships developed. Yet, whether these relationships continue to progress (in the long-term) into offline life was typically determined by whether they could travel to meet, and eventually one or both partners relocating. Among the participants in this research, intimate relationships were formed with those whom they interacted with most frequently, such as guild members, or other online friends within the same social networks.

The spaces of online games are not often thought of as potential places to meet intimate partners, especially now that it is common practice for people to utilise services that specialise in matching couples, such as online dating websites and agencies. For example, the people/clients of these online dating sites are 'overt' about their reasons for participating in that space, which is to find someone to be intimate with. One consistent finding with participants who meet intimate partners in online games is that unlike online dating services, the intimate bond

that is formed as the relationship evolves is unexpected and they go on to experience many different virtual environments as friends first, whether it is completing quests, raiding, or just spending time together in a private location until an intimate bond is formed. While couples may not be able to physically touch, they nonetheless experience very intense emotions, which could be seen to compensate for the lack of physicality in their relationship. The relationships that do transfer to offline life sometimes lead to marriage, and matrimonial ceremonies are not only performed offline (in wedding chapels) but also online within virtual settings and landscapes. As Yee (2003b) states, virtual weddings can be viewed as elaborate forms of digital story-telling and ritual that fulfils a purpose for those involved. For some gamers (like Matt and Regina), virtual weddings offer a way of sharing a celebratory occasion with online friends and family who may not be able to attend an offline wedding, due to obstacles such as being unable to travel long distances.

Chapter 6 addresses the gendered power relations that are constructed in WoW's online gaming culture and how these affect gamers' relationships within this space, both online and offline. To the best of my knowledge an examination of these particular issues have not been carried out elsewhere within the field of feminist geography and as such, this thesis offers an original examination and critique of online gaming culture. As argued by Dodge and Kitchin (2001), online space has several implications in relation to identity and community, as it allows people to explore who they are, as well as changing who they are, and more importantly, it continues to provide new spaces in which communities can develop. Online games are designed first and foremost to be a form of entertainment, yet developers are careful to incorporate elements into game design that cater to social and political needs of their subscriber base. While it is important to highlight the ways that game designers introduce various elements of the offline world into the game (such as wedding chapels and quest lines that are based on romantic intentions), it is also equally important to examine how online games attempt to govern 'undesirable' elements of offline cultures that make their way

into the culture and discourse of online games, such as misogyny and cybercheating. I discuss these issues in Chapter 6, as they highlight the ways in which these issues can be understood, not necessarily as a gaming problem, but as a wider social problem that becomes manifest in online environments through dominant discourses and game design (Yee 2014). In short, the majority of gamers in WoW are boys and men and this is reflected in the dominant patriarchal discourse, which perceives difference as a threat, and acts to defend the status quo of hegemonic values.

As discussed in Chapter 6, there is currently a debate occurring within gaming culture worldwide, concerning numerous attacks against women who either work in the games industry, or who attempt to critique the nature of games. These types of attacks, however, are not new (similar arguments have occurred previously although in connection with other games and other women) but what makes this time noticeably different is that the first cyberbullying attack (against Zoe Quinn) occurred in August 2011 and further attacks have continued to follow (most notably against Sarkeesian). Past debates concerning gendered power relations did not have the same longevity. Tensions are continuing to climb as angry members of the gaming community continue to abuse and threaten those who take a stand against the forms of sexism and misogyny that are present within gaming culture. Sarkeesian (2014), for example, at a recent public speaking engagement noted that gaming is undergoing a massive fundamental shift away from archaic values, and that it is a shift that is being felt most severely by those who do not want to see it change. Hence, lengthy hate campaigns are raging against those like Sarkeesian who brings attention to the ways in which women in games are often portrayed as hyper-sexualised and placed within traditional roles that construct them as submissive and powerless sexual objects. Recent research shows that these types of sexualised portrayals are typical and stem from the hyper-masculine culture that continues to be a dominant feature within the majority of games (Yee 2014). Consequently, there is a continuing reinforcement of exclusionary culture, where those who are 'other' are marginalised and made to feel 'out-of-place'.

Indeed, now more than ever before, there is a greater push for change within the gaming industry that is aimed at becoming more inclusive of all gamers, not just heterosexual and heteronormative males. This is evident when looking at recent game content promoting same-gender romance within a popular game like *Star Wars*, and the assertive stance being taken by people working within the gaming industry and calling for a change in relation to the level of hateful and harassing speech that has been directed at particular women. Yee (2014, 114) argues that "false beliefs and stereotypes of women are not only being perpetuated in virtual worlds, they are being made true via play". It is common for women playing online games to experience forms of sexual flirtation and harassment. In my experience, however, the chances of these occurrences happening are significantly reduced if there are two or more women involved in the same event, guild or other online social network.

Considering the extent of prejudice stemming from dominant patriarchal values, online environments continue to provide a viable option for people to re-imagine their virtual representations of 'self', as well as exploring new aspects of their identity. While these re-imaginings are possible, they may not always be tolerated, as they are often viewed as transgressional performances (Turkle 1995). Meeting people online was once considered to be a dangerous way to meet people, however, this is no longer true, and has become common-place. Research examining online relationships has rapidly grown in the past two decades, and in conjunction with that, so too has research around the topic of cybercheating (Baker 2002; Baker and Whitty 2008; Whitty and Carr 2005, 2006; Woods 2008). The internet is a popular choice for people who want to experience different ways of being and also different types of relationships, therefore, relationships formed over the internet are often linked to cybercheating and the break-down of offline relationships due to online infidelities (Whitty and Joinson 2009). Indeed, this was the experience of several research participants who made such intense emotional connections with their online partners that it resulted in either one or both of them

ending their offline relationships. Some people, however, do not see online relationships as having an impact on their offline relationships (Whitty 2005). Cybersex or erotic role-play (ERP) can and does happen in WoW in locations like Goldshire (aka. Pornshire Inn), and also social guilds such as Abhorrent Taboo where erotic role-play is a common interest amongst members. Yet, the definitions of both of these virtual sex acts do not fit with the experiences discussed by participants, who describe their experiences as a way to feel closer and connect on a deeper emotional level.

People from all around the world now play online games as a daily activity and for many it represents more than just a 'game'. At present, there is nothing to suggest that the popularity of games are going to lessen and if anything, they will continue to grow. Yes, games are entertaining, however, that does not negate the fact that they provide gamers with a multitude of in-depth and fulfilling experiences, again proving to be much more than just fun and games (Bertozzi and Lee 2007). With this in mind, more thought needs to be given, and more action taken, that leads to altering gaming environments in order to affect change for the majority of gamers, and in a way that encourages inclusivity and acceptance of others. The following section suggests ways in which future investigations can contribute to building upon some of the findings of this research, as well as developing a more in-depth understanding of games.

**Future research**

Scholars from a variety of disciplines are paying closer attention to how people interact in online spaces within various contexts, including games. This research offers a critical examination of the diverse ways in which online identities and online relationships are constructed, practised and negotiated within WoW. There is, however, a substantial lack of examination from geographers concerning the spaces of online games and given the increasing popularity of video games as an everyday activity there is much to be gained by further investigation that seeks to understand the plurality of online gaming experiences. Online games are, for

many people, a social activity that involves diverse and sometimes vast social networks.

Additional empirical research is needed in relation to the use of avatars as virtual representations of self. Research shows that the ways in which people construct their avatars affects the way that they interact within an online environment, and as technology has progressed, people have been reporting higher levels of *felt* experience and immersion in online games. This research looks at how players 'connect' and identify with their virtual selves, and avatar construction plays a crucial role in these connections. Game developers have grown increasingly aware of this and WoW, for example, continues to expand its range of the avatar templates for players. This thesis examines in detail aspects of online/offline identity in relation to avatar construction but due to the research scope of this study, an in-depth examination of the ways in which socio-cultural constructions of race are interpreted in online games was not carried out. Therefore, how 'race' is interpreted and portrayed in online games is an important element that would benefit from further research.

Gender switching in games is now a normalised practice. Indeed, the only people now surprised by it are typically those who have not experienced playing an online game. Yet the rates of gender switching by men and women vary across different games. Why is this and what makes gender switching more plausible in some games and not others? Gender based assumptions are evident in online games and there is a growing body of work emerging that examines the 'queering' of identity in these online spaces. Performances of sexuality and gender influence in-game culture and therefore, continued research examining the ways in which offline stereotypes map onto gaming environments and discourse would be beneficial. Considering the various elements that make up identity are also useful as relationships in place are greatly affected by changing combinations of social categories, such as age, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and more.

This thesis adds to literature around geographies of love, media, digital space, and feminist geography. It critically examines the ways in which intimate relationships evolve in online games. There is much work that focuses on either the advantages or disadvantages that may be gained from engaging in an online social environment but rarely are user-experiences examined as a whole without an emphasis on dichotomies such as mind and body, online and offline. Geographers have been slow to examine the spaces of online games and the relationships that are formed within them. Online relationships in games, however, deserve further consideration of these widely accepted dichotomies and by extension an examination of spatiality and how it affects relationships that evolve within digital spaces.

As this thesis demonstrates, gaming is an activity that is more than just 'fun and games', as the overall composition of games in contemporary times is designed to encompass a myriad of features which are intended to evoke emotions and enhance game experience. There is an obvious lack of geographical studies that explore the extent of affect and emotion in online games. There are many elements of online communities which would benefit from further investigation, including the spaces of guilds or clans which many players feel they 'belong' to. As such, the continuing examination of geographies of emotion and affect in video games would be an excellent addition to the discipline of geography.

There are several different servers that operate in WoW. While some of the discussions focus on participant's experiences of online relationships in PvP servers, the majority of the data has come from participants who play on PvE ('normal') servers. Also, my own autoethnographic observations were conducted while playing within a PvE server. As such, it would be helpful to see in-depth examinations of the other servers that are available in MMORPGs, such as RP (role-play) and RPPVP (role-play, player vs. Player). Pairing this examination with one that has a particular focus on sex and gender would make a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on gaming practices and cultures.

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Women who game are often misrepresented or underrepresented within gaming culture, and dominant stereotypes of "women gamers" often impact upon the ways in which women choose to engage with games. Therefore, it would be of benefit for further research to focus on how cultural practices within gaming affect player connections, as well as play-styles, and also the affect on gamers' identities both online and offline.

The traditional stereotype of who is a gamer is now less relevant and it is now well established that gamers are people from a diverse range of backgrounds. There is also a fundamental shift occurring with the way that games are being designed, which is more encouraging of diversity and a culture that promotes acceptance of 'other' identities. Similar to past events, the resulting 'backlash' against changes in gaming (that encourages a greater level of acceptance towards diversity within the gaming industry) deserves further attention. As mentioned, similar criticisms of women in games have arisen in the past, but what is noticeably different about current events is that the cyberbullying has not dissipated as it usually does. Instead, its continuation has seen several women affected by it, who have attempted to critique games or directly challenge the traditional values that are embedded within them and by proxy, within mainstream gaming culture. This is a current and topical issue and as such, it is a prime topic for future research.

WoW provides gamers with a myriad of choices and activities, embedded within a competitive, violent, and complex social culture. In summary, this thesis provides an original contribution to digital geographies as it examines critically the diverse and complex ways in which identity, relationships and gaming culture are experiential for WoW players. The cross-disciplinary research on video games has examined many challenging and diverse dimensions. Most, however, have been concerned solely with representational elements of gamer experience but it is necessary to continue beyond this with further examinations of multiple elements, including emotion and affect, re-presentations of identity, and the relationships

that both evolve within and sustain the multi-faceted, diverse and complex environments of games such as WoW.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Information Sheet

**Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning Programmes**
School of Social Sciences
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
*Te Kura Kete Aronui*
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
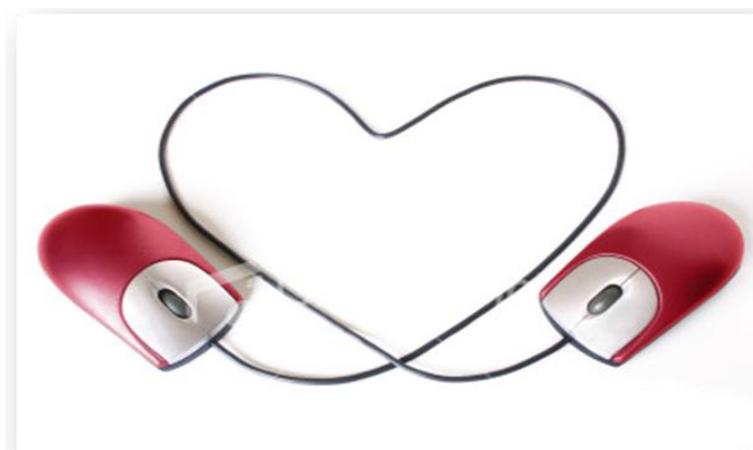Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand

www.waikato.ac.nz/
wfass/subjects/geography

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

### Hi, my name is Cherie Todd and I'm a postgraduate student in the Geography Programme at the University of Waikato



Information Sheet - "Love and Romance in Online Games"

**The research –** Thank you for taking the time to consider being a part of this research. I am a doctoral candidate in geography and my supervisory panel consists of Professor Robyn Longhurst and Associate Professor Lynda Johnston. My PhD research focuses on people's experiences of intimate and romantic relationships in online gaming environments. For quite some time now, people have been using the internet as a place for meeting friends, making new ones, and developing relationships. Gaming forums often contain discussion threads about these topics (such as in-game marriages) but very little academic research has been conducted. As a result, I am interested in finding out more about people's experiences of intimate relationships in online gaming. This includes people who have experienced online relationships that evolved and became

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'real-life' relationships. It also includes people who have experienced temporary online relationships that did not fully develop but where there was a level of intimacy and attraction between people.

Specifically, I would like to talk to both men and women who:

- are 18 years of age or older;
- game in either World of Warcraft (WoW), Second Life, or MU Online, and
- have experienced intimate or romantic relationships in online gaming.

If this is you and you are interested in telling me about your experiences, I would very much like to hear from you.

**Your involvement –** In order to gain an in-depth understanding I would like to use several methods in this research (which are completely voluntary), starting with an initial interview. This would be like an informal chat, where I will ask you a number of questions. The interview will last about 60-90 minutes and be at a time and place that suits you.

After the initial interview you will be invited to participate in two further stages of this study. These subsequent stages will be explained in-depth and your decision to participate is completely optional. If you decide to take part, the second stage would involve a period of reflection on your part using either an online forum, or hardcopy diary that I will provide for you. You will also be able to use photography to capture any images or spaces that you feel reflect your experiences. A camera will be made available for you if you require one. I will also provide you with a guide on the kinds of things you might like to reflect on but you would be free to write about anything (not contained in the guide) that you think is important to you.

The final stage of research involves a short follow-up interview and would last approximately 30 minutes. This interview would be scheduled to take place shortly after completing your diary entries, at a time and place that is suitable to you. Again, this would be like an informal talk to see if you want to discuss further any reflections and also to see how you felt about your participation in this research.

**What does it mean to be a participant in this research? –** If you choose to participate, you can contact me via phone or email (through my contact details on the first page) and ask any questions that you might have concerning this research. If you are agreeable to meeting with me, we will discuss a suitable

time and place for us have the interview. If you live overseas, interviews can take place over the phone, or online using software such as Skype. I will also use a small audio tape-recorder for an accurate record of our discussion; however, if you do not feel comfortable (for whatever reason) about being recorded that is okay, and instead I will only take notes as we go.

**What are my rights as a participant? –** As a participant you will have rights that protect your personal safety. You have the right to:

  - Refuse to answer any questions;
  - Ask any further questions about the research that occur to you during your participation in the research;
  - Anonymity and confidentiality, and;
  - Withdraw from the research at any time up until three weeks after the interview.

**Confidentiality –** I will treat all discussions held within the interview as private and confidential, and will not share them with anyone outside of that situation. Unless your permission is obtained, your name or any other identifying characteristics will not be disclosed in the final report or any other report produced in the course of this research. Any information pertaining to third parties will also be treated with the same respect. The recordings and written transcripts will be stored securely in a locked cabinet within my university office. Any electronic information will be accessible only by password and this will be changed regularly to ensure documentation security.

**What will my information be used for? –** The findings of this project will be presented as part of my PhD thesis. In accordance with University guidelines, three hardcopies must be produced, and one accessible online copy. The research findings may also be used in conference presentations and journal publications.

**So if you want to participate, or just want some more information –** Call me (Cherie) on 07 838-4466 extn. 6283, or email me at cjto@waikato.ac.nz and I will organise a time for us to meet. I look forward to hearing from you.

*This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz, postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.*

**Appendix 2: Short Profile Questionnaire**


**"Love and Romance in Online Games" – Profile Questionnaire**


**Participant's Name:** _____


| **Age:** 18-29 | 30-35 | 36-40 | 41-45 | 46-50 | 51-55 | 56-60 | 61+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|


| **Ethnicity:** | **Living arrangements:** | **Occupation:** | **Gender:**<br><br><br>**Sexuality:** |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |


| **Income:** | Less than $20,000 | $20,000-30,000 | $31,000-40,000 |
|---|---|---|---|
| $41,000-50,000 | $51,000-60,000 | 61,000-70,000 | Greater than $70,000 |


| **(Under 18, living at home)**<br>**No. of children/teens:**<br><br>**Female:**<br><br>**Male:** | **(Over 18, living at home)**<br>**No. of adults:**<br><br>**Female:**<br><br>**Male:** | **Average number of hours (per week) spent gaming:** |
|---|---|---|

Who else at home games online?

How many PCs or other online gaming platforms do you have at home:

What rooms are used for online gaming?

# Online Relationships in World of Warcraft

## 1. "Love and Romance in World of Warcraft"

Welcome and thank you for taking part in this research.

The following page outlines the research principles for this study.
Please read the provided information carefully as it enables you to be fully
informed before consenting to participate.

Click on the 'next' button to read the Information Sheet for this research.
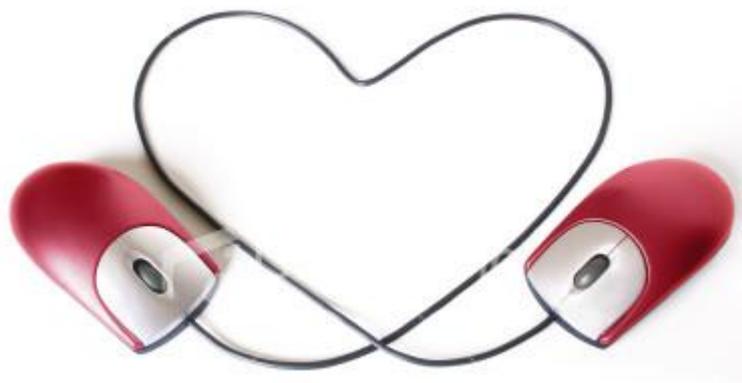
## 2. Research Information Sheet

Introduction to Research - My name is Cherie Todd, I game in WoW, and I am a
PhD student in the geography programme at the University of Waikato, New
Zealand. As the title of my research suggests, I am interested in talking to gamers
who have experienced an intimate connection (past or present) with another
gamer while in World of Warcraft. This is a very relevant topic because every year
more and more people are finding love online, including on-line games. However,
very little is known about intimate relationships within on-line gaming
environments, and as we know, gaming is an extremely sociable activity for most

of us. As a result, I would like to talk to people about their experiences of love and romance in WoW.

Participation: To be involved in this study you must be 18 years or older.

Your participation will involve completing a brief on-line questionnaire about the relationships that you have experienced while playing World of Warcraft. This questionnaire can be completed in your own time and should only take about 10 minutes.

As a participant you have the right to:
• Refuse to answer any questions;
• Ask any further questions about the research;
• Anonymity and confidentiality, and;
• Withdraw from the research at any time.

The information provided will be used in a PhD thesis, journal articles, conference presentations, seminars and/or lectures. All information provided by participants will remain anonymous, and at no time will I ask a participant for account information.

Confidentiality: I will treat all information as private and confidential and any identifying characteristics will not be disclosed in the course of this research. Any information pertaining to third parties will also be treated with the same respect.

The supervisory panel for this research consists of Professor Robyn Longhurst and Associate Professor Lynda Johnston.

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz, postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

Contact Details:

PhD Researcher - Cherie Todd

Geography Programme

School of Social Sciences

Te Kura Kete Aronui

The University of Waikato

Private Bag 3105

Hamilton, New Zealand

www.waikato.ac.nz/wfass/subjects/geography


Please click on the 'next' button below to begin the questionnaire.


## **Informed Consent**


**1. Please read and tick each box to verify your informed consent (required)**

☐　I agree to take part in this online research questionnaire.

☐　All information provided by me will remain confidential and anonymous, and no details that could compromise my rights of confidentiality and anonymity will be used in any research findings or publications.

☐　All data collected will be stored securely.

☐　Taking part in this research is voluntary. I have the right to withdraw, and if I do withdraw any data provided by me will not be used in any future research or publications.

☐　The information provided will be used in a PhD thesis, journal articles, conference presentations, seminars and/or lectures.

☐　If I have any complaints or questions regarding the ethical conduct of the research, I can contact the Secretary of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Ethics Committee by email: fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz, or by postal address: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand.

## Questionnaire

**2. Please enter your details here (required):**

Age: [                    ]

Gender: [                    ]

Occupation: [                    ]

Email: [                    ]

Which website
were you visiting
when you read
about this
research?: [                    ]

Please note: An email address is only required to verify your participation in this research and will not be used as a contact address unless requested by you.

**3. How long have you been playing WoW?**

☐ Less than 1 year

☐ 1-2 years

☐ 2-3 years

☐ 3-4 years

☐ 4-5 years

☐ More than 5 years

**4. Have you been involved in a flirtatious or romantic relationship with another person in WoW (or in a game similar to WoW)?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

**5. (This is an open-ended question and your answer can be as short or as long you like. For the purpose of this research, it is important to provide as much detail as possible).**

**Can you tell me:**

**How did you meet this person?;**

**What avatars were you both using at the time?;**

**What countries were you both living in?;**

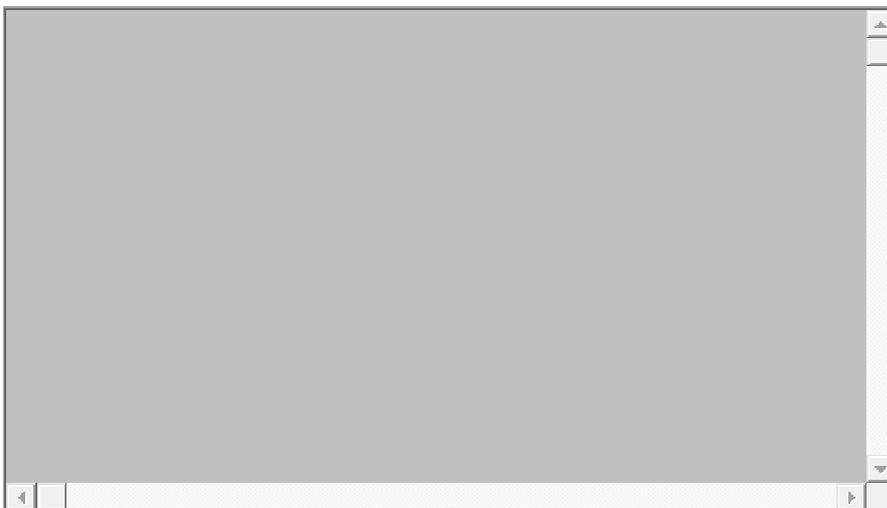**When first meeting, what was it about that person that you found attractive?;**

**How did your relationship progress (did you go on to do any other private messaging, or webcaming?);**

**Did you meet in real-life?;**

**and**

**Are you still friends, or more than friends today?**

**If not, can you explain a bit about how and why it ended?**

**6. While playing WoW, how many romantic relationships have you been involved in (with other WoW players)?**

☐ 0      ☐ 1      ☐ 2      ☐ 3      ☐ 4      ☐ 5+

**Is there anything else that you would like to add or comment on?**

## 7. Optional - Follow-up Interview

**Optional - I would love to talk to you further about your experiences of romance in WoW. Interviews can be conducted via Skype, Vent, e-mail, or telephone. (If you have any questions, you can email me: cjto@waikato.ac.nz)**

**Please enter your email address here if you are agreeable to me contacting you for a follow-up interview.**

# "Love and Romance in on-line games" – Interview questions

1. Do you belong to a guild?

    o

2. For you, are the relationships that you form in on-line games any different, more or less important than those that you form in the 'real life? (Please explain why)

    o

3. Approximately, how many people have you met who have become your friends while playing WoW?

    o

4. When you game, how much of the 'real' you do you put into your avatar? (e.g. Is your character the same gender, sexuality etc?; Do you act any differently than you would in real-life)?

    o

5. Have you ever played a character (toon) that is the opposite sex to you? (Please explain why)

    o

6. What do you think of the options that are currently available for avatar creation? (What do you like, and is there anything that you would change?)

    o

7. WoW has implemented some game content that makes it more appealing for people interested pursuing romantic relationships? (such as chapels, tuxedos, white dresses, wedding rings etc …)

    o Have you used any of this content, or attended any weddings? (If 'yes' please describe)

        ▪

    o Would you consider having an in-game online wedding of your own? (Please explain why)

        ▪

8. Gaming is often stigmatised and regarded as an anti-social and reclusive activity. What are your views on this?

    ○

9.  Has anyone ever tried to discourage you from gaming?  (Please explain why)

    ○

10. Everybody who games, likes to game for different reasons, what are yours?

    ○

11. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

    ○

*Your answers are much appreciated! Also, if you have screenshots of your toons together, you can paste them here. Please email this back to me when you've finished. Thanks ☺*

# GLOSSARY

**Avatar**: "An avatar is a virtual representation of the user, or of the user's alter ego or character, in the virtual world of the game" (Ochoa 2012, 961).

**Chat channels**: There are many different types of communication channels in WoW. General chat, for example, is one, and this is where anyone in the same region can read and reply to anything being said within general chat.

**Clan:** See 'Guild'.

**Class**: Tanks, DPS, and healers are all classes and players must decide which class they want their avatars to specialise in.

**DPS** (Damage Per Second): DPS are players that specialise in doing as much damage as they can, typically in the quickest time possible.

**Gamer**: In this thesis a 'gamer' is anyone who plays in WoW. In some studies, however, 'gamers' are sometimes defined or categorised according to how many hours they play. A 'hardcore' gamer, for example, is usually defined as someone who plays more than 20 hours per week.

**Ganking**: In gaming terms "ganking" means "killing" and typically involves a group of players (or one high level player) ganging up on one or more lower level players who have little to no chance of defending themselves.

**Guild**: A guild acts as a home base for players. They usually support new members and assist each other in gaining high level armour and gear. Guild members also have their own chat communication channel, which means that if they choose to, they can discuss guild matters with a degree of privacy.

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**Healer**: This is a character class that is dedicated to healing group members. Healers are typically shaman, priests, or druids. They can do damage but they specialise in maintaining the health of the people in their party.

**Horde/Alliance**: These are the two warring factions in World of Warcraft.

**Levelling**: This is how players measure their advancement in a game and is done in conjunction with the earning of experience points (XP). As they gain levels, their avatars become stronger

**Loot**: These are items collected from killing in-game monsters, or from looting treasure chests. The majority of high level armour or gear comes from the loot that is dropped after killing 'bosses'.

**MMORPG** (Massive Multi-player Online Role-Playing Game):

**NPC** (Non-Player Character): NPCs are part of the game design which are created by Blizzard to interact with, do battle against, or fight alongside 'real' gamers.

**PUG** (Pick Up Group): This is a group of players who usually do not know one another prior to forming a party but who need the assistance of other gamers in order to complete particular dungeons, raids etc.

**PVP** (Player Vs. Player): is a more aggressive play-style, where for example, gamers belonging to opposing factions, can freely target one another and engage in combat.

**PVE** (Player Vs. Environment, aka. 'normal' mode): focuses less on fighting other players and more on fighting NPCs. Also in normal mode, players from opposing factions cannot target one another unless they agree to engage in combat before it

begins, cross over into the opposing faction's terrritory, or enter an area designated for PVP combat.

**RP** (Role-Playing): People on RP servers typically enjoy this type of play-style because it allows them to get 'into character' by 'role-playing' with other gamers, and performing in a way that is an accurate representation of the races they are portraying. Typically, gamers on RP servers are more knowledgeable about the lore and history associated with each race, this often influences the ways in which they perform and communicate with others while in the game environment.

**RPPVP** (Role-Play and Player Vs. Player): Generally, the players on these particular servers enjoy PVP action that is lore centric. In other words, they like to participate in the game, however, their engagement in the game follows the development of their character, which also influences how they choose to interact with the game's storyline, as well as the other gamers present.

**Race**: This refers to the species of avatars that are available within a game. In WoW this includes: (Horde) blood elf; tauren; goblin; undead; troll; and, orc. (Alliance) night elf; gnome; dwarf; worgen; draenai; and, human. Pandaren can belong to either Horde or Alliance.

**Realm/Server**: When beginning a game for the first time players must select a realm to play on, and player's avatars are saved to the realms that they are first created in. Types of realms include: PVP; PVE; RP; and, RPPVP

**Tank**: A tank specialises in taking a large amount of damage without dying. It is a tank's job to make hostile targets attack him/her so that the other party members take as little damage as possible.

**Toon**: This is an abbreviation of the word "cartoon". It is often used by gamers when discussing one of their various avatars.

**Troll / trolling** (aka. 'griefers' or 'griefing'): "These gamers take pleasure in causing upset and negative responses in fellow users. In online games, the activities of "griefing" and "trolling" are that of disrupting the play and enjoyment of others. … e.g. taking intentionally contrary views and being deliberately inflammatory to get a response" (Kirman *et al.* 2012, unpaginated). In recent times, this definition has expanded to include not only sociopathic behaviour but also mischievous behaviour, where the intent is not necessarily to cause distress.

**XP** (Experience Points): Progress in many games is measured by the accumulations of experience points and they are typically earned by killing monsters, completing quests, and doing other in-game activities.

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