A vertical waterfall flows down a dark, mossy rock face. A wooden bridge with a railing spans across the middle of the waterfall. The surrounding area is filled with dense green foliage and trees.

IDENTITY AND  
COLLABORATION IN

WORLD  
WARCRAFT

PHILLIP MICHAEL ALEXANDER

IDENTITY AND COLLABORATION IN  
*WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

## ELECTRACY AND TRANSMEDIA STUDIES

Series Editors: Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes

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Phillip Michael Alexander

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Series Editors: Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes

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*For my mother, who never doubted for one second that I could write a book.*

*And for Julie, who loved and supported me through a year plus of playing World of Warcraft incessantly and years of writing afterward. Hey, I did it. I made it.*



## Preface: Adventures in Raiding

As I sit now, years removed from the period when I conducted this research, it strikes me that even though the span of time I devoted to being a war-bound goblin seems so long ago, I still vividly remember those experiences and all those that participated in them with me. What you are about to read is an account of that period in my life, which consisted of almost a year's worth of research with a group of gamers. It's a group I became so much a part of that I raided from academic conference hotels, from a hospital waiting room, while watching over the sick, and while being bedridden myself. This endeavor was a large part of my life.

Over the course of the next several pages I will share what I've learned, and what I think our field can learn, from a group of dedicated *World of Warcraft* (WoW) raiders. From digital identity to collaborative work, from learning through failure to growing to have a sense of groupness, Flashpoint—my participant guild (a pseudonym, as are the participants' names)—has much to offer all of us.

I want to take a moment here to acknowledge the friendships I formed, and to offer my sincere thanks to Iceman, Leah, Lint, Sally, Salty, and the others who played smaller roles but never the less learned to cope with a writer and researcher invading their world. I want to thank my mother, who was there during my exhausted hours post-raid to make sure I was doing things like sleeping and cleaning up and remembering to go to work. I want to thank my partner, Julie Alexander, for understanding that I would never rate raiding over her but had a research obligation all those many nights. And I'd like to thank Dànielle DeVoss, Bill Hart-Davidson, Jeff Grabill and Malea Powell for coping with my dogged insistence that I'd found something with these gamers and for their help extracting and explaining that information.

As you read, I hope that as readers you can see and respect my attempts to preserve the voice and vibe of the raid group; at times this leads

to lengthy descriptions, quirky narratives and more than one phrase I'd never utter were I not quoting someone. But over the course of this book, I want you to feel, as much as possible, like we are walking together within the *World of Warcraft*. I hope I prove a worthy storyteller.

IDENTITY AND COLLABORATION IN  
*THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT*



# 1 WHAT HAPPENS IN AZEROTH CAN'T SEEM TO STAY IN AZEROTH

*This is a story.*

*I'm almost four feet tall. Taller if you count the helmet.*

*The huge guy standing in front of me goes by the name Ragnaros. Okay, he's not a guy. He's an Artificial Intelligence. An AI. He's the "boss" of this raid—the Firelands—and in the inexplicable way that combat happens in an MMO, he just mocked me but will stand there, staring at me, until I initiate battle. He spends a great deal of time mocking me while our raid prepares to attack.*

*A little bit about Rags: this is not the Ragnaros that Mark Danger Chen (2010) and his thirty-nine compatriots fought in Leet Noobs. Ragnaros, who is the final encounter in the level 60 Molten Core raid that Chen studied, is also the final boss of Firelands, the place we're currently campaigning. This Ragnaros is kind of the same as the one Chen's group fought, only he's totally different. I stress this because time in the WoW narrative is highly negotiable, dependent on the player's mutual agreement as to when, in the game narrative, a contemporary event is happening. My story of Ragnaros is one of myriad Ragnarratives.*

*What strikes me this particular day is that Ragnaros has a weapon with a name, a sure sign of elite status in fantasy. From Excalibur to the Ring of Power, important items carry names of their own. For Ragnaros, it's a huge two-handed mace called "Sulfurion, the hand of Ragnaros." In the days of the Molten Core, players had to complete a lengthy quest to ever wield the weapon themselves, and very few did. In Firelands, Ragnaros has a slight chance of "dropping" a version of the mace when he dies.*

*The whole time I've been standing here, Ragnaros has stared at me, unblinking. Perhaps it's because my toon's four-foot frame is lumbering around swinging a four-and-a-half-foot tall mace, "Sulfurion, the hand of Ragn-*

aros.” *You see a hero has a weapon with a name, usually one he took from a villain he vanquished. So as Rags and I lock eyes across the digital dance floor, he is measuring my mace and I his.*

*Time in the World of Warcraft is a funny thing. Actions can be repeated based on resets, which for most raids is a week—one week passes, and everything that the group killed the week before is alive again. I’ll talk more about that in a little bit. But for now, let’s just stick with the fact that while new things happen, there’s a Ragnaros here and a Ragnaros in Molten Core. Right now, only the Ragnaros in Molten Core is in the right now that is also years ago. And likewise, the Ragnaros in front of me is blissfully unaware of what this group did to him last week.*

*Because last week, after months, Ragnaros finally dropped “Sulfurion, Hand of Ragnaros.” Now it glows with the icy chill of my death magic. I mean he still has one, too, which I guess cheapens the original thrill of taking his named weapon. But these things happen in Azeroth.*

*Iceman, our raid leader, is calling out final checks over Ventrilo. I listen, concentrating on Ragnaros. In just a matter of seconds I’ll get my cue and dive headfirst into the fray. That is, after all, what I do. I barrel into things full speed.*

*“On your count, Phill,” I hear. My finger slides to my push-to-talk button, and I clear my throat. “In three, two,” purple lightning erupts from my hand, “one.” Ragnaros tosses his head back, shaking off a first hit from Sulfurion. And a little goblin, a big nerd, a scholar with a scruffy virtual face, swings his hard-earned virtual weapon with a name into the boss he’s beaten fifty or so times, largely in hopes of one day owning Sulfurion. I smack Ragnaros with his own mace. He shouldn’t know, but something in his virtual eyes says he knows.*

*And so it begins.*

As I look back on the book you now hold in your hands, my work seems oddly optimistic considering the political changes in America in the year 2018. Regardless of one’s political loyalties, though, there are two things that some people have suspected for quite a while that are now intimately clear: (a) the era of the internet bringing about a new type of identity that is not simply curated and rhetorically shaped but that is in fact capable of bringing about nation-altering political change has arrived in the form of a Twitter-overactive President and major media outlets that have a passing interest in checking the veracity of what they see and hear from “sources” in the blogosphere and (b) we live, to sadly quote Jerry Maguire, “in a cynical world.”

How does this provide a starting point for talking about identity in *World of Warcraft*?

I spent over a year of my life walking in two worlds, observing and studying a virtual realm called Azeroth while living in a dying industrial city in the upper-Midwest during the debates over the auto bailout and just before it was discovered that a town less than one hundred miles away had a toxic level of lead in its water supply. I spent a year watching people and interacting with them in a game that was, at that time, the most popular (based on total users) in the world, a game that boasted 11.5 million unique users. During that time, I saw some of the best and some of the worst of people.

My core argument here is that the identities that people form in video games are complex stories that matter in ways we might not initially note. That digital identities matter is not a new argument. James Gee (2005, 2014) intoned it. Sherry Turkle (2011) laid out a book-length argument about it, then another. Bonnie Nardi (2010) detailed her own experiences in *World of Warcraft*. Nick Yee (2014) coined the term *the Proteus effect* for the impact that virtual identities have on real people. Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2007)—who I draw from heavily here—talked about a concept she called *identity tourism*. Then there's Mark Chen's (2011) *Leet Noobs*, which details a similar research experiment to my own that had significantly different results. There are others, to be sure, but that sample provides a sense of the scholarship that exists (don't worry, you'll see more as you read this book).

This study brings a few major new elements to the fore, though, things that are more relevant now than they were when I did the research in 2010–2011. These four elements shape this study in markedly interesting ways:

1. My methodology, while similar to both Nardi's and Chen's, is in fact informed by an Indigenous rhetorical lens and focuses on storytelling and a piecemeal theoretical lens. Game studies and rhetoric—the two fields my work emerges from—haven't often embraced Indigenous theory or Indigenous people, through no real fault of their own. There just aren't that many of us in the academy. Being able to be one of the trailblazers to bring that view and voice to my corner of academia is a large part of why I do what I do. It is also a reason that I will at times take a defensive stance in the following pages, as fields that don't have many (or any) Cherokee scholars tend to ac-

identally minimize the cultural understandings and ways of building and transmitting knowledge that are critical to my ancestors and to me. I'm trying to decolonize here, and I won't allow for erasure. This means I'm probably going to do things you as a reader don't expect, like addressing you periodically in the second person and telling you stories.

2. While Chen was also a gamer first, none of the other scholars I've mentioned to this point, and none of the rhetoric-leaning game researchers who were active when this project started, are life-long gamers. It's not the same to enter gaming as a researcher first. That is not a claim that the work of people like James Gee and Bonnie Nardi isn't valuable and rich. I would never make such an assertion. But it is different to see the view of someone who is a cultural outsider but a game culture insider like myself. My literate life is intimately tied to games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Warcraft* is a language I speak.
3. One of the issues I've taken with other scholars is the hedging with how "real" the consequences of the virtual world and virtual identities are due to the level of separation many feel from their characters. My research runs counter to that, as the impact of in-game "life" is clear in many cases.
4. Lastly, looking at digital identities as a form of narrative, as essentially living stories, suggests a different way of viewing the all-too-real lives of people in digital space. The commonalities and dissonances caused by this differing view of the material inform the need to make a good faith effort to avoid allowing cultural biases to inadvertently colonize the field. In other words, yes, we know some of the things that I present here because others have talked about them, but we also know—and sometimes forget—that there is more than one way to look at the things we know.

My sample size is small, but the results I saw point to fascinating points of further research. I don't mean to hedge by mentioning the sample size, but I want to point out from the onset that I worked with a group that consisted of thirteen other players at most, and by the end there were usually only nine players and myself present for most raids.

Ten out of 11.5 million is not, purely speaking, *representative*. As such, I don't intend to make universal proclamations. At the same time, the sheer volume of time (both in individual session durations and the duration of the study) leads to a rich body of data for consideration.

### **BEFORE WE START I: WARCRY**

To understand the *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), one has to understand where the *Warcraft* universe came from. A signature property for Blizzard Entertainment (a company whose intellectual property includes *Diablo* and *Starcraft*), *Warcraft* started as a game called *Warcraft: Orcs vs. Humans*. A Real-Time Strategy game that depended as much on resource building as strategic combat, the initial *Warcraft* lore bears shocking similarities to the tabletop game *Warhammer*. The reason for that is simple enough; *Warcraft* started as a *Warhammer* game, but the Blizzard crew couldn't get Games Workshop to grant them use of the *Warhammer* name and copyright (Plunkett, 2012). Fans of a franchise attempting to capture the magic they felt in another game, though, developed *Warcraft*, lovingly. The world of *World of Warcraft* is rooted in gamer culture itself.

*Warcraft* itself saw three editions with multiple updates. *Warcraft III* was the last of those games, and it served as the foundational lore-building narrative for *World of Warcraft*, introducing major characters like Thrall (the leader of the Orcs), Arthas (the Lich King who was the focus of the second *WoW* expansion), and Illidan Stormrage (the Night Elf who served as the major enemy for the first *WoW* expansion and the focal point of the sixth and most recent *WoW* expansion, *Legion*). This is just a sampling of what is a rich narrative history, and obviously, I haven't recounted it all, as that would be a book into itself. My point is simply that there is a complex lore foundation for *WoW* that extends from 1983 and the early days of *Warhammer*, that ran the span of three iterations of a RTS, and that finally took root in the first version of *WoW*, what players refer to as "vanilla *WoW*." *WoW* has a long, thought-out plot behind it. Players enter a world rich with stories.

### **BEFORE WE START II: WHAT IS WORLD OF WARCRY?**

One of the unfortunate side effects of writing about a complex game like *WoW* is that I need to preface most of what I say with an expla-

nation of what the game is and how it works. If you're familiar with *WoW*, please skip to the next subheading.

*WoW* is part of the genre of games called Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). Massively Multiplayer means what it sounds like; there are many, many players in the game at the same time, and while it can be played solo, a solo player must inhabit the virtual world that all the other players are in. There is no dedicated, offline single-player mode. Online, of course, means that the game requires internet access and is played on a server. The player's computer doesn't even hold the data for the world; it merely holds a client, a piece of software that interfaces the game world. The designation as a *role-playing* game (RPG) is where the definition can become problematic. I could devote the rest of this book to exploring varied definitions of "role-playing game," as it is one of the recurrent topics of discussion in my classes and research, but for the sake of explaining *WoW* succinctly, I will simply say that RPGs find their origin in the table-top *Dungeons & Dragons* system and are most popularly exhibited by games like the *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Warrior* series. Typically,<sup>1</sup> RPGs are set in a fantasy world with magic and dragons (though not exclusively), and each player character has a "class" or archetype with specific skills, a skill tree that requires choices about which skills to select, and experience points that players earn as they advance through the game.

*WoW* is an MMORPG, set in a fantasy world called Azeroth. Azeroth is home to Humans, Orcs, two races of Elves (Night Elves who are defenders of nature and Blood Elves who have been corrupted by magic addiction), Trolls, Undead, minotaur-like creatures called the Tauren, an alien race called the Draenei, a werewolf race called the Worgen, a humanoid panda race called the Pandaren, and three fantasy-based small races—Dwarves, Gnomes, and Goblins. These races are split into two over-arching opposing factions: The Alliance (the "good" guys, led by the Human faction) and the Horde (the "bad" guys, led by the Orc faction). There are multiple character classes that serve one of four roles: tank (a player who absorbs damage and defends), healer (a player who heals), melee damage per second (DPS) and ranged DPS (both players who do damage, one from close up and the other from a distance). Classes are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: *World of Warcraft* classes and brief descriptions

<b>Class</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
Death Knight	Melee DPS or Tank class, wearing heavy armor (added in <i>Wrath of the Lich King</i> expansion)
Demon Hunter	Melee DPS or Tank class, wearing light armor (added in <i>Legion</i> expansion, after my research)
Druid	Capable of all styles of play (DPS, tank, healing), wearing medium armor
Hunter	Ranged DPS wearing medium armor
Mage	Ranged DPS wearing light armor
Monk	Capable of all styles of play, wearing medium armor (added in the <i>Mists of Pandaria</i> expansion after my research)
Paladin	Capable of all styles of play, wearing heavy armor
Priest	Healing and ranged DPS class, wearing light armor
Rogue	Melee DPS class, wearing medium armor
Shaman	Healing and DPS class, wearing medium armor
Warlock	Ranged DPS class, wearing light armor
Warrior	Tank and melee DPS class, wearing heavy armor

*WoW* exists in two essential phases for players, something Chen (2011) and I both noted in our research.<sup>2</sup> These two phases consist of the leveling game and end-game content. During leveling, where a player character starts at level one and must work up to the maximum level cap (which is now 110; at the time of my research it was eighty, then eventually eighty-five). Players do this by earning experience points from various activities, primarily questing (undertaking tasks at the request of Non-Player Characters, or NPCs) and entering dungeon instances with four other players. These are called “instances” because they literally exist as an “instance” of the dungeon on the server. For many, the leveling process is long and can be difficult. I detail parts of my leveling experience in chapter two.

The bulk of my research was conducted during what is referred to as the “end game.” In MMORPGs, and recently in multiple other titles from *Pokémon* to the *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, there exists content that can only be played once the player reaches the maximum level. In *WoW*, the end-game content is made up of a series of “raid instances,” which are ten or twenty-five player dungeons with maximum level content.<sup>3</sup> The goal for players in end-game content is to complete all of the challenges, but leveling is replaced here with a second type of “grind” (repetitive working behavior) in the form of acquiring the Best in Slot (BIS) armor and weapons for the respective character. Unlike leveling, which had a set endpoint for each expansion, each new raid instance or event changed the BIS, meaning that for a player to be at the literal top of *WoW*, he or she would need to have a very specific set of items that was meticulously maintained.

There are a few other key terms that will appear as I discuss *WoW*. I have created Table 2 to simplify the process of accessing these terms. If you’re not a gamer, I recommend putting a bookmark on this page so you can return as needed. Again, if you know *WoW* well, this table will show you nothing new.

Table 2: Useful terminology for navigating MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*

Term	Meaning
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
Tank	Defense/damage soaking class
Healer	Class that provides healing to other players
DPS	Damage Per Second. Also a class designation
Melee	Hand-to-Hand combat range
Ranged	Distance combat
Grind	To undergo repeated in-game actions to gain levels or to obtain items
Threat	To have the attention of a computer controlled enemy (to take attacks)
Taunt	To obtain threat
BIS	Best in slot, a designation for the very best items a player can have

Term	Meaning
Instance	A 5-player cooperative dungeon
Raid	A 10- or 25-player cooperative dungeon, originally at maximum level, though old raids remain in the game when expansions are released
Expansion	A major addition of content to the game, with a change in maximum level and several other features (from new classes to new races)
Patch	A smaller update, either to change mechanics or to add smaller pieces of content
NPC	A non-player character, or an artificial intelligence controlled by the game
Quest	A task given by an NPC that results in the player earning experience and items and/or gold
PVP	Player vs. Player, or combat between player characters
PVE	Player vs. Environment, or combat between a player or group of players and NPCs
Pull	To obtain threat to start an encounter; this term is also used to define the unit of one battle with an instance enemy (e.g. “we beat him on the fifth pull”)
PUG	Pick-up Group; a group assembled from players found in a public chat channel
Toon	The avatar or in-game character

### **NOW, THEN, LET’S PULL**

This is the story about how I met nine people and slew dragons in the gathering shadows of late-night online gaming. A little about me: I’m the sort of person who has always asked questions. I grew up beside technologies now seen as ubiquitous: digital composing and the internet—a child dialing in with Kermit to access BBS systems on my v, coding simple animations in BASIC, video gaming, and even learning to read in part through games on my Atari 2600. I spent much of my teen years chatting with people around the world through a Unix shell in MUDs and MOOs (or “Talkers” as we called them), over UseNet, then eventually IRC, the precursor to instant messaging. I grew up

looking at screens, always asking how that screen allowed me to know and connect with others. I knew someday the screen—or more realistically the people on the other side of the screen—would speak back to me. I was always already a digital rhetorician, poking and prodding; I just didn't know the words for it yet.

I came to academia because of my lived experiences. From as far back as I can remember, I was writing and telling stories: short fiction, newspaper stories, essays, notes, etc. It's in my DNA to tell stories as a way of interacting with and understanding the world. I have always likewise struggled to understand why some people in the academy hold failure in such disdain and often believe that there's one proper way to get to a goal; gamers know that incremental learning works, and "failure" is just another word for "not yet," and the perfect story is boring anyway. In other words, I knew from early on that my philosophical view of learning, writing, and making had been fundamentally and profoundly shaped by play.

During the early years of my graduate education, Gee (2003) burst from linguistics into the field of game studies with the seminal work *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Mainstream scholars were suddenly looking at gaming as a serious thing and later making serious games, joining a small but robust and interdisciplinary young field that became what we now call Game Studies. Gee's book hitting just before I started my MA studies was the start of a sort of game studies crossover into rhetoric, my home discipline, and the first time I realized I might be able to bring what I knew to what I was learning. At that time, however, many of the people studying games were academics that came to gaming as a place to research.<sup>4</sup> Many of the things they were surfacing and reflecting upon, analyzing and critiquing, were things that to gamers were quite obvious, if unspoken. This led to the realization that my voice—as a gamer turned scholar—would offer a differing, contrasting view. Since those early days of my academic career, I've gone from having to defend myself and fight to get a seat at the table to now sitting in a program where I am appointed as a games researcher and instructor who teaches in a lab that has Mario and Megaman on the walls.

While more gamers who grew up scholars now dot the discipline, the number who did so in the era where games came of age in America, from the late 1970s into the 1990s, are still a rarity given the primacy of that age group to the creation and consumption of games; late

Gen-Xers like myself trained, for the most part, in an environment where studying videogames outside of computer science or the rare enlightened program in psychology or media was rare. It is all the more unique that I am a Cherokee scholar, a member of one of the most demographically small groups in all of academia and usually the only member of my tribe who does game studies work at any given conference or meeting.

As an active gamer making the turn to study a space I've inhabited my entire life, I have fully embraced a philosophy held by Bonnie Nardi (2010) and others, one instilled in me by my first reading of Ellen Cushman:<sup>5</sup> I don't believe one can rightfully research and observe gaming—in my case, *WoW* gamers—without playing along and giving back. Due to changes in technology—particularly the rise of Twitch.tv and raid streaming—I do believe now it is *logistically* possible to research a raid group without playing (and hence without the risk of being a burden), but I would still argue it is ethically questionable to sit and watch but claim to understand the raid experience. If you want to understand something, you should do it. It would certainly be unscrupulous to take the position I stake here—that I am a gamer first and foremost—and then to not participate while researching. Previous to Twitch this was only a hypothetical concern, really, as the researcher would have needed to literally watch over someone's shoulder to observe without playing, for there was no place for an extra person to see the raid happening.

Likewise, my position as a lifelong gamer made it easier to understand how to reciprocate. Researchers should give back to the communities that help them do their research as Cushman (1998) reminded us, and to accurately represent my participants in the guild Flashpoint, I had to make an effort to be a part of it and do what they did, even when it was something tedious and time consuming. If research participants refer to the researcher as “them” or “you” and not “one of us,” there's a telling lack of engagement that I find personally problematic, and I started my time researching *WoW* as “one of you annoying research people,” so I know firsthand how the gamer impression of the researcher functions. Most of what I know about raiding, about this raid group, and about the practices discussed in this text, comes from my being a part of it all, from me literally asking “how can I be one of you?” In that sense, while I strive for objectivity, it is an aspiration I know I rendered nearly impossible by existing in my data. I also whole-

heartedly accept, as the academic-as-storyteller, that large portions of this book—including the bulk of the second chapter—are about me. That was not a decision made from hubris; it is the only real way to engage the work in good faith. I was there. I tried not to draw extra attention, but any time something great—or something awful—happened there was a one-in-ten chance I was at the center of it.

### WHY WOW, WHY NOW?

When I began researching gaming thirteen years ago, it was so new to the rhetoric and professional writing that most of my discussions with other scholars were about explaining why games matter, an argument that is no longer needed but nevertheless formed the foundation of my gaming studies identity. Over the course of the last decade, gaming studies has exploded to the extent that keeping up with everything that is being produced has gone from being a simple task in the year 2000 to nearly impossible in 2017. When people talk to me about my work now they ask if I've read this or that person, and sometimes I have not simply because keeping up with the growing game studies discipline is meticulous, which is an amazing thing. Despite this exponential growth, though, I am sure that to some who study rhetoric and writing, the study of video games might seem like an ill fit. It's still sometimes difficult for a game studies scholar to find footing among the traditional disciplines. I also realize there are some who will find frustration in the fact that my work doesn't catalog every mention of *WoW* in composition studies. We've grown past that; it's no longer a case of needing to collect every game studies piece into a tight bundle so readers will see the field. It's time to deploy strategically and act like we have that seat at the table. As such, I will mention folks like Ian Bogost (2010, 2015), Richard and Rebecca Colby (2013), Matthew S.S. Johnson (2013), Christopher Paul (2012), and the folks, myself included, in Doug Eyman's collection *Play and Pedagogy* (2016) here, now, as I deeply respect their work. There are, however, few significant linkages between what I present here and these works. In fact, I'm not certain that my methodology even fits the field of composition and rhetoric, something I will address later in this chapter.

My work is both diverse and in a way oddly focused, as I have a keen interest in looking at cultural rhetorics and issues of digital iden-

tity, along with how gamers build stories, collaborate, and create while achieving goals. Gaming offers the following avenues for my research:

1. Digital identity: MMORPGs are a rich source of digital identity as storytelling due to the long-term investment by players and the fact that so few players choose to attempt to literally represent their real-life identity in such games. Players adopt fantasy faces and fantasy stories, meet other crafted characters, and go do things together, often, as my research will illustrate, filtering their “selves” through a fictional sieve. In the end, these digital identities become the building blocks for the game world itself. Secret spoiler: that’s what *WoW* is. It’s a big collaborative story.
2. Collaboration: Rhetoric itself emerged as a discipline from the Greek tradition, and along the way rhetoric has frequently stopped to reconsider the process of persuasion and concession that is involved in making decisions/working together in what would appear to be harmony. These same mechanisms are critical in gaming: a group that doesn’t operate in harmonious collaboration will be met, over and over, with less-than-optimal results. In other words, they fail. The willingness to surrender to a collaborative identity is a key to game success in *WoW*.
3. Digital group identity: in a moment of revelation that felt like a mix of “but of course!” and “why did no one stress this before?” my study illustrates clearly that ten digital identities in a raid group MUST congeal into a single digital group identity, that successful unit I just mentioned in point 2. This identity operates by making the most prominent, most valued elements of the individual identities (internal censor as gatekeeper, for example) a codified social contract that tells a continual story of the raid group.
4. Sticking with collaboration to end up with a “thing”: it’s one thing to work together on something. It is quite another thing to finish that thing successfully with a group that desires to go do something else together. In *WoW*, that’s essentially what gaming becomes. Gamers often work to build collaborative stories while approaching “progression.” Progression, in the sense of an MMO, is different than how the word might be

familiar to most. Progression—a listing of the encounters successfully completed by a group—is a tangible thing. Gamers come together to do stuff and keep doing stuff together when that first task is completed.

These four points not only anchor my work, but they are why I study gaming in the first place. Like many academics, I wear many hats. But long before I wore the hat of “academic,” I wore the hat of “gamer.” And gaming, from the eyes of the lifelong gamer, is a place where all these things—issues of identity, of collaboration, of literacy acquisition, of thoughtful persuasion, of the development of narratives in the literal sense, etc.—happen and have always been second nature, a part of play. As someone who has now taught for sixteen years and was, before that, a writing center tutor and teacher’s assistant for three years, I have seen literally thousands of students and their work. Many of those students viewed the work—just as many workers in general view their jobs—as drudgery. But some of those same students write page after page in gaming spaces for fun, paying for the right to do digital writing. It would be unrealistic to think that 11.5 million people might ever join in a collaborative writing project as a hobby, but that many people once played *WoW*, paying their fifteen dollars a month, their forty dollars per expansion, and often more just to be able to be a part of that practice.

In many ways, the work of this study is a continuation from my previous research, which as I mentioned was greatly inspired and influenced by the work done by Gee (2003) in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Gee himself has gone on to write several other pieces on gaming that expand on his central ideas (2006, 2007, 2014), but the challenge I noted in his work—one that was touched upon by many (Chen, 2011; Juul, 2005; McAllister, 2004; Sicart, 2013; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2014)—is for the next set of scholars to move on from the focus on the individual gamer and toward the collaborative gamer. Gee’s work expertly illustrates how gaming leads a gamer to several valuable literacy skills, but because Gee’s focus was on individuals and literacy acquisition first and foremost, he only in rare cases mentions a second player or another player in an online world. Taylor (2006), on the other hand, focuses specifically on looking at the denizens of an online world (*Everquest*) and their interactions in the real world, but again, due to the scope of her study her research, only touches in places on the in-game interactivity of groups

in terms of how they get things done. Constance Steinkuehler (2005, 2006) likewise looks at economies in gaming spaces but doesn't dwell on player-to-player collaboration. The study of games has come to the point where people like Chen (2011) and myself are dedicating time to large group gaming processes. As a Cherokee, I am particularly interested in looking at how these groups handle storytelling and narrative<sup>6</sup> as an identity builder and to create the sense of community.

## WHAT I MEAN WHEN I SAY NARRATIVE

I hold these truths to be as close to self-evident as any truths I have ever known:

1. Humans, by their nature, tell stories. It is something we do, with or without any training to do so, though virtually all of us learn much about the practice and some become quite adept. Some even get degrees in this art. These stories are what we are.
2. This telling of stories is our primary method of communicating that which we have experienced to others.
3. To tell a story is to narrate, and to narrate is to build narrative.
4. There's a legion—millions upon millions—of gamers networked together, telling stories, that don't hold points one, two, and three above to be evident at all. They aren't thinking about their narratives in the ways that I am. They're thinking about playing with words, sometimes not fully recognizing what they are *actually* putting in play.

One of the things this book does play with—pun intended—is “narrative,” particularly as gaming studies views it. For my purposes here, I will interchange “narrative” in some ways with “storytelling,” invoking the Cherokee storyteller's understanding of narrative. At the same time, I want to farm English studies for contributions that can lead to an expanded sense of what narrative means.

I start with two useful concepts from Mikhail Bakhtin (1985): *heteroglossia* and the *chronotope*. Heteroglossia is important to me in a different way than it is for Bakhtin, though I believe he would be agreeable to my use of his term: while he looked at the conflict and in-

teraction between the varied voices in a single authored text (a novel), I am interested in that same “multi-voiced” nature of a narrative but in the sense of it being in a space where there are actually multiple speakers/authors collaborating to create the narrative itself. I think it is important to look at the differences in these voices as a tension that shapes the narrative while not allowing it to be a force that rips the narrative apart. The chronotope, meanwhile, is a logical parallel for what I would call “gaming space:” it’s the bound off time-space in which a narrative “happens,” (Huizinga’s “magic circle,”) and as the anecdote at the start of this chapter illustrates, games that have narratives can have separate chronotopes that crisscross. I believe this is of utmost importance in considering gaming narratives because I theorize that in many games the chronology might appear to be smooth and linear, but progressions will occur in chaotic real-world-time bursts followed by moments of lag, meaning that the narrative isn’t nearly as smooth as it might seem.

Others take steps similar to my own desire to simplify the definition of narrative while allowing elasticity. David Herman (2009), in his book *Basic Elements of Narrative*, wrote:

A relatively coarse-grained version of a working definition of narrative . . . runs as: rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people—in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change. (2009, p. 2)

Similarly, in *Telling Stories: Language, Narrative and Social Life*, Deborah Schiffrin and Anna De Fina stated, “narratives are fundamental to our lives. We dream, plan, complain, endorse, entertain, teach, learn and reminisce by telling stories” (2010, p. 1).

Paul Colby adds an important wrinkle to the overall sense of narrative studies. Colby began his contemplation of narrative from the (at least in his work) presumed fact that everyone tells stories, a belief I share. His interest however was in something quite different. He wrote:

This book is dedicated to the opposite premise: that even the most “simple” of stories is embedded in a network of relations that are sometimes astounding in their complexity . . . the

most familiar, most primitive, most ancient and most seemingly straightforward of stories reveal depths that we might hitherto have failed to anticipate. That we do not anticipate them is usually because *we do not attend to the network of relations* in which the story resides.” (2001, p. 2; emphasis added)

In other words, Colby argued that one of the things that traditional narrative studies might be neglecting is the interconnectivity of actors in a single story. For example, my story of a classroom experience isn't just my story, it is the story of me and the other people in the room; our discourse; that temporal moment; any other non-human actors that might have been a part of that particular class session (at the very least—perhaps many more); and, to discount the depth and impact, the flavor and potential revision brought about by the agency of those other actors to the story is to shortchange narrative itself.

The work of Julie Cruikshank took this a step deeper, claiming that the very networked nature of narrative is what gives a narrative its potential power. Writing of Yukon First Nations storytellers, Cruikshank starts by quoting Mark Johnson, who asserts:

Not only are we born into complex communal narratives, we also experience, understand and order our lives as stories we are living out. Whatever human rationality consists in, it is certainly tied up with narrative structure and the question of narrative unity. (1998, p. xii)

To this, Cruikshank added, “My thesis is this. In northern Canada, storytellers of Yukon First Nations continue to tell stories that make meaningful connections and provide order and continuity in a rapidly changing world. (1998, p. xiii) In other words, again, narratives make meaningful connections and bring order.

And perhaps the most easily taxonomical/quantifiable theory of narrative comes from cultural studies scholar Mieke Bal (1985), who proposed that we come to think of narrative as a three-part system: the [narrative] = speaker [story] + [fabula] audience. Bal's terms here vary a bit from how others have utilized them. The narrative text, she asserted, is the *actual* account of the narrative. The speaker/narrator does the “telling” within that text, but what is being told is the “story” which is the account of what happened. These two things seem rather uncomplicated by other scholars, but Bal's use of *fabula* is slightly different from the usual. Emerging from Vladimir Propp, Bal reminded

us that *fabula* is traditionally the actual order in which events occurred, coupled with *sujet*, which is the way the story is told. For Bal, however, *fabula* seems to take on elements of the more traditional *fabula* and *sujet*, presenting the narrative as “contain[ing] two elements, event and action. An event is the transition from one state to another state. Actors are agents that perform actions” (p. 6).

Bal’s divisions can be highly useful for looking at narratives that exist in non-traditional spaces/mediums because of the very clear step taken to separate the narrative (a product in text) from the story and her version of *fabula*. To then adapt Bal’s construction slightly utilizing the other theories here, it makes sense to me that *a narrative* is an account of events that occur between actors, shared as a story that doesn’t make any illusions of perfectly representing the events or the agents but that is true to the story that the author/narrator(s) intend to share. Narrative is concerned with an internal logic (of time, of structure), though that logic could very well exist only for the specific narrative. And most importantly, a narrative is a story being employed to do something—be that to inform, to share history, to change someone’s opinion, to entertain, or to teach. Narratives are stories that do work. And I will argue, in just a few pages, that gamers collaborate to create narratives, those narratives are their identities, and understanding the complexity of that personal attachment to doing and creating can change how we understand work and composing.

### EVERYONE IS A STORY

One of the most well-worn clichés in writing is that “everyone has a story.” It’s true, but it’s trite. Of course, everyone has something to tell others. My study is going to assert something that on the surface might seem just as trite but reflects a profound truth about gaming and about digital identities written large: “everyone IS a story.” This is an Indigenous understanding of existence, as most tribes name locations and people based on what they’ve done or what has happened to them. But it’s not an exclusively Indigenous idea. Descartes famously told us he thought, therefore he was (1635). Those thoughts were a human narrative. Michel DeCerteau (2002) stresses that places and things exist because they are practiced into being, and those practices can be viewed as a narrative account. One of my mentors during graduate school, Malea Powell, used to start every significant piece of her

academic work by saying “this is a story.” Those collected works built her career and her scholarly identity. You, reading this, I am willing to venture that when you meet new people, you tell them stories about your life. I am willing to bet there are time-worn and memorized stories you repeat and hence relive with family and friends. As the oft-hapless Cosmo Kramer learned on *Seinfeld*, upon selling his life story to Jay Peterman, it was impossible to exist without those stories. Or as Craig Womack noted in *Red on Red*, “[a concept called racial memory] has to do with the way narrative shapes our communal consciousness; through imagination and storytelling, people in oral cultures re-experience history” (1999, p. 26). Stories are powerful, and understanding how they are formed and circulate as a function of play refines our understanding of what is happening in games.

In *The Truth About Stories*, Cherokee scholar Thomas King (2003) said:

The truth about stories is that that’s all we are . . . When I was a kid, I was partial to stories about other worlds and interplanetary travel. I used to imagine that I could just gaze off into space and be whisked to another planet . . . I’m sure part of it was teenage angst, and part of it was being poor in a rich country, and part of it was knowing that white was more than just a colour. (p. 2)

Later in the same chapter, King related, “One of the tricks to storytelling is, never to tell everything at once, to make your audience wait, to keep everyone in suspense” (p. 10). While this might seem maddening to some, it is a truth that relates to the nature of narrative and that interfaces well with how gamers build their stories. Gamer stories start and stop, but they end up being suspenseful chains of cliffhangers. Likewise, this account of gamer experiences, like a good story, is going to force inductive thinking. This is familiar to gamers.

Role-playing gamers who have played tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons* know that stories are the currency, and a character consists of three things, really: (a) a set of numbers and list of skills, basically a story delivery method and way to limit what can be done, (b) the narrative of what the character has done, and (c) the story the character is telling at the given moment. Popular culture has even zinged a generation with this revelation of how character and story is linked when HBO’s hit *The Sopranos* ended because the story was over

and the screen went black with no resolution, not even to the scene let alone the overarching narrative arc. We all know on some level that we are stories. It's why there is a word like "legacy," and it's why histories are written a certain way (De Certeau, 1992).

In *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) offered this definition of role-playing game:

First, a role-playing game should establish some sense of community through a ritualized, shared storytelling experience amongst multiple players. RPGs should also involve some sort of game system, which provides the framework for the enactment of specific scenarios and the solving of problems within them. Finally, for a game to be considered "role-playing," the players must, on some level, alter their primary sense of identity and develop an alternate Self through a process known and identity alteration. The players enact these secondary Selves in a co-created story space, imagined by both players and their guide. (pp. 11–12)

Here we see that, in Bowman's definition, the RPG is a story being written with players utilizing alternate selves. I want to take that just one step deeper, still, and say that those secondary selves are also stories.

It's less conventional to think of a video game character as a story. And in realty, that's not exactly what I'm claiming here. What I am claiming here is that the identity of a *WoW* character is the narrative built by the player and the player's cohorts. Unlike a human being in the real world, which we can quantify in other scientific ways because we have mass and fingerprints and we have documents that attest that we were born, are citizens, can drive, were married, etc., all that exists of a *WoW* toon is a somewhat generic visual shell (with some options for creativity but not nearly enough for a toon to be unique) with a line of accomplishments and the stories that link those accomplishments together. As I will illustrate in chapter two when I talk about role-play heavy *WoW* players, this argument makes itself easily. The narrative is buried a bit deeper in the more causal player who raids but doesn't actively role-play, but as you will find in the latter chapters of this book, a strong case can be made that anyone playing *WoW* is always already role-playing whether by choice or not.

So why *WoW*? Four reasons: (a) At the time of my research, it was the largest online multiplayer environment (it is, as of this writing,

dwarfed by Riot Games' *League of Legends* that claims to have one hundred million unique users); (b) *WoW* allows for the best potential replication of how people play tabletop RPGs, though a very small part of the community engages in that sort of play; (c) Still, it cannot be played alone, even if one chooses to play solo; and (d) there exists a strong variance between the skillsets required to do the various things in the game (the different classes, leveling vs. raiding, pvp vs. pve, etc.) while still holding a constant narrative, even if the narrative of the game itself is fragmented and multiple in interesting ways. Blizzard has time and again built games with tremendous mileage, and with *WoW* still going strong six years after my research ended (to give readers a peek into how long it takes to get a book written and revised and published) the game proved to be a wise choice, even if talking about *WoW* has generally gone out of style.

I propose in this book a sort of bridging work that needs to be done in gaming studies with regard to how scholars and gamers understand identity in the gaming world. While I did observe a great deal of learning during my research, I'm not specifically interested here in talking at length about games and learning as so many have done that well and that wasn't really the focus of my work. My focus comes from a desire to see how narrative is used to construct identity and transmit information. I came to this work as a scholar of rhetoric and composition who learned from an undergraduate career as a creative writer and a childhood filled with self-publishing, journalism, and notebooks full of stories and reflections, a gamer to the core, a role-playing nerd rolling dice in basements. As a Cherokee, I also came of age with a tradition that understands storytelling as both sacred and utilitarian. I carry with me an understanding of narrative as telling stories from the perspective of a "narrator," a narrator that often and freely interjects their own beliefs and knowledge while telling stories, breaking down the formal wall between storyteller and active participant, between reporter of information and practitioner in performance. Narrative always presented itself as elastic to me: growing up a storyteller, I was keenly aware that the story doesn't always come out the exact same way each telling (some do—some MUST), and that many stories are works in progress that evolve over time, that lose sections or gain sections, and that become more or less relevant. Also, as I've mentioned in other venues, I grew up around devout Baptist Christians, but the story of how the world was created, for me, was a story about a spider,

fire, and crossing the water in various configurations depending on the storyteller. Stories have at times been all I had of how who I am is different from the world I walk in day-to-day, an academy that at times ignores the voices that shape the actual world.

But if several people are telling “the same” story (e.g., “Remember that night Lenny hit the winning shot in the junior high basketball tourney?”), large elements of each retelling will remain the same, copied and replicated, almost canonized on a small scale. In other words, some portions of our stories we share, but other portions of our stories remain personal and can be used in a sense to identify us.

The missing piece for game studies, the thing just starting to appear in game studies scholarship, is the agency of gamers in relation to narrative and what happens when they work together in all the varied spaces that gaming touches. The narratives being told in gaming environments are a product of intense collaboration between gamers/toons, the game, the game’s producers, non-human actors like the gaming machine or controllers, and any number of outside cultural elements that might on a case-by-case basis enter the gaming process. It is incorrect to look at a game as coming out of the box and having its narrative; part of the narrative—in some cases, like with an MMORPG, most of the narrative—is unwritten when the game itself is a “finished” product, at least in the sense that it is ready for distribution.

When players, and their unique traits along with all the things they’ve copied from others, enter the equation, complexity emerges that is difficult to account for without serious deviation from its modus operandi. In other words, we might, ludically, be talking about yet another instance of throwing a round ball at a round hoop, but if there are just two seconds on the clock and LeBron James is throwing that ball at a hoop somewhere in Cleveland in the seventh game of a championship series, that narrative is different than me playing horse at the local park.

## METHODS

In a sense, the methodology used to conduct this research is easy to explain, and in another way, the complexity can easily be lost by those who resist the Indigenous frame and want the data to fit a clean, easy-to-share categorization and coding. Indigenous American cultures almost universally are listeners before they are speakers. We also don’t

believe in the sort of clear-cut ownership that current American culture embraces, which is part of the reason why there are so few of us remaining on our native lands. We value a tribal social system. And, of course, Indigenous cultures place a high value on storytelling, as I've noted here already.

In *Research is Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson lays out the four stages of forming an Indigenous paradigm for research as related by Patsy Steinhauer (2009, pp. 52–54). The first stage was Indigenous scholars taking up a home in the Western tradition, attempting to know that world as well as or better than Western scholars. This lacks the moment of challenge, succumbing to the idea that the Western scholar is the “master.” The second stage, where an Indigenous paradigm starts to emerge, includes an attempt to dig into Western culture as a foothold to avoid being marginalized. As I've already noted here, that marginalization is real, but this was only a step along the way. The third stage is a de-colonial move, an attempt to Indigenize the Western tradition. It's a moment of heavy challenge, but it is not an imposition of Indigenous methods as much as it is a pointed and critical use of Indigenous thinking to reinterpret Western thought. The final stage, stage four, is research that understands Indigenous thought as a center, as the starting point and foundation. That is the sort of work I am doing here, utilizing the second-fourth stages of this paradigm-building process to craft a methodology that allows me to share a Cherokee view of gaming narrative and identity formation.

The end result of combining these elements is a scholar/researcher who is highly attentive and listens carefully and critically, who captures stories and scrutinizes stories, and who utilizes other scholar's work the way one would use a tool, to achieve an end. I know that final point will at times hit some of you in an odd way as it is a decidedly non-Western concept. Do not read it as a lack of understanding or a lack of reverence when I apply a theory in a way that the original author might not have. To put that another way, I've often taken issue with Audre Lorde's (1984) assertion that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, not because the statement is wrong but because the idea that a master owns the tools is contrary to my thought process. I would never steal another scholar's ideas, but from a Cherokee perspective there is no major issue with, for example, taking up Baudrillard's simulacra without fully embracing the political dimensions. I completely understand that Baudrillard had a pessimistic

and highly political view in the work that defines simulacra. Methodologically, however, I refuse to believe that the usefulness of his ideas should be ignored because his reasons for creating them are different from the way I deploy them. That is not a Cherokee way of seeing his work. I was trained in a field where scholarship is utilized from pre-Greek societies, but no one wrote at that point. We play with people's intended points all the time, giving a professional bias in some cases that is puzzling from other perspectives. Why should scholarship be concerned with the specific politics of Foucault but not pause over the fact that almost every scholar from the beginning of recorded history to around 1940 was part of a system that oppressed and minimized the work of women and people of color, sometimes to a violent degree? How can we trivialize the social moment of a piece of theory but not scrutinize the fact that the foundations of composition theory are based on scholarship about oratory? We accept these things, I believe, because we recognize that circumstances have changed and we know more now. That's my argument for what I call a piecemeal—playing on the terms piecemeal and the idea of a suit of armor being made “mail”—lens. My utilization of theory represents the Indigenous attempt to use non-Indigenous thought in Indigenous ways. In other words, I can hammer in a nail with a brick. I wouldn't call it a hammer, but it did the work that a hammer would do. I don't think anyone needs to call it a hammer. This isn't a Derrida moment. It might seem like I'm speaking in riddles, but that's not it at all. I'm asking you to think a different way. Sometimes Indigenous thinking is inductive. Sometimes it's subtle. It might be uncomfortable, even, but it will show you something unfamiliar even in the familiar. And you can disagree with me in the end. I respect that. My methodology simply asks for the right for an Indigenous approach to game studies to exist. There's no value judgment in this story.

I also believe that we must be ever aware of the biases that exist in contemporary research. As Krista Ratcliffe wrote of auto-ethnography and storytelling in *Rhetorical Listening*, “. . . for those of us trained in the academy, scholarly research too often resembles Tannen's definition of men's listening, that is, let's duel verbally or in writing so that I can prove how much I know and, hence, you'll respect me” (2005, p. 39).

For this reason, I will point only briefly to studies that have done similar sorts of ethnographic based research, like Celia Pierce (2009)

who likewise realized the importance of the game researcher entering the game world. I do not mean to minimize similar studies, as I believe this methodology is important, but I also wish to represent accurately why I conducted my research in the method I did. I didn't discover many of the books mentioned here (like *Communities of Play*) until I was already deep into—and in some cases done with—my research. In that sense, I find the similarity in methods reassuring in that others are being published and respected doing similar work, but I want to—both out of honesty and out of a highly political desire to talk about cultural positionality—make it clear that my methodology stems from Indigenous understandings of story and interaction.

### OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The following chapters consist of me telling you stories; this is intentional, and while I realize it may seem like I have taken a longer path than the reader might have anticipated to reach a point, it is important to understand the complexity and detail that emerges from specific game contexts, and those contexts, due to the nature of communication in-game, end up being highly narrative and story-like. As King (2004) reminded us, a good story doesn't give you the whole account at once. Confined as I am by the genre of the book—stuck speaking to you mostly with alphabetic, textual words with some illustrations—I cannot, as much as I would like, take you as a reader into the game world and point to things, take you out for a raid, or let you get your feet wet and your weapons dirty. We cannot inhabit, together, Blackwing Descent. I cannot offer you a seat on the back of my dragon and fly you to Sulfurion Spire in the Firelands so that you can gaze down onto Beth'talac's web. You can't hear me telling the stories, can't listen to my voice and feel me pacing to the key moments. I can only describe what I observed, tell you what people did, where people were, and how it all went down. At times, it might feel like I'm "just telling you a story about what happened," but in reality, this is a methodological decision that I did not make lightly; the only way I can truly do justice to what I saw is to be the ancestral storyteller, to share stories of what happened within my data. I know that traditional scholarship might not think of these stories as a unit of research, but part of understanding what Indigenous scholarship can be is taking that walk with someone like me; maybe for a few hours we have to enter a

space where the traditional methods of doing this sort of work aren't positioned as superior and that something different, with roots just as deep but grown in a different soil, takes a turn at helping us to see. To strip away too much of the ambient activity trivializes what actually happened; to reduce the accounts of my research to simplicity is a form of narrative murder, to commit a violence on the people I studied. I am asking you to trust me when I tell you the richness of what is happening, the value to everyone, the doorway to understanding, is contained in these stories.

The chapters that follow do varied work, but all are drawn from my year-plus of research. The first content chapter, chapter 2, looks at my experiences while leveling my characters to make it to the "end game," but the focus isn't actually on the leveling, even though that's what is happening. I focus instead on a pair of incidents that are highly personal but set the stakes for what I mean when I claim that characters are stories. First, I reflect more carefully on an incident that I wrote about in-the-moment for the *World of Warcraft and Philosophy* collection (2009), a moment where my then girlfriend, now wife, and I experienced serious gender confusion. Secondly, I share an account of myself and the very first of my raid participants witnessing one of the few moments of outright racism and racial tension that I observed in my year of research. I want to go on record as stating that the fact that we only encountered overt racism once in raids was a supreme anomaly; on any given day I could sit in town in Orgrimmar—the largest of the Horde cities and the place most filled with random player encounters—and see moments of profound, troubling racism. The fact that I found a group that generally enjoyed the company of the others involved tinted the racial conflict in the research, but given the trade-off of such rich understandings of how the group functions, it's an acceptable happenstance.

In chapter 3, I look at the formation of Flashpoint, the raiding guild I spent my time in *WoW* researching. I was lucky enough to be there for the birth of the guild and for the last raid, so I actually watched the entire "life" of the guild, a life that exceeded the usual in duration. In this chapter, drawing heavily from Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2007), I talk about how Flashpoint came together as a group, detailing the identity formation of my core participants and how their first attempt at forming a guild fell apart only to find a natural progression into a group that worked. At times it will appear that this is a utopian

narrative, but what it actually is, when scrutinized, is the account of the moment where after trying the fifth or sixth key on the ring the lock finally spins. It's the click moment, and it's highly relevant, even if discussing the sound of that click sounds a bit celebratory in context.

In chapter 4, I expand upon the concept of group digital identity, using as my focus two members of the group who deviate from the group's adopted identity and cause the group to essentially short circuit and then break. While this might sound judgmental and punitive, it's not a matter of opinion, as the coherence of the group can be cataloged and the reasons for the change in coherence are easily isolated. The chapter illustrates how the collision between desired narratives and play styles literally caused failure. I build here from the "not a thing" concept of community to explain the phenomenon of a "raiding group" in a way that illuminates the complex relationships between the group members and their identities.

The latter chapters of this book look at how a group works together when everything goes well (chapter 5) and when nothing goes right for a long, long time (chapter 6). Chapter 5 tracks Flashpoint through a routine raid encounter wherein success is achieved almost every single attempt. Chapter 6, looks at just how many times a group can fail and still succeed. This is another place where I am left at the mercy of a limited data set. I would have loved to have utilized a moment in chapter 5 where the guild failed so badly that it never recovered and finished its goals. In Chen's (2012) book that moment is critical development. But Flashpoint left like Peyton Manning, walking off after finishing all of its goals (before a new endgame could be established). These two chapters serve to illustrate how identity and progression function and how we might port those skills to other venues if we can get the participants to buy in to them the same way a *WoW* player buys in to the game.

In the conclusion, I take a trip back to Azeroth many, many years after Flashpoint disbanded. I look at how the game changed, and I look up old friends. In finishing my toon's story, I also find the opportunity to offer the last definitive point of this volume: digital identity is highly personal and intricate, and I have a chance to explain how my Indigenous method has offered a new way to think about game studies and identity.

This is a story.

## 2 He's Still the Kind of Girl Who Likes Matching Daggers

*It feels like forever ago, but at this point I'm walking around nearly invisible as a petite elf named Sasha. The hunter in the group is my now wife. Now, I mean, not "now" in the in-game moment. We're facing a thing called the Curator, in an older raid called Karazhan.*

*The Curator is inflicting serious damage on our group. The tank is dying; the healers are struggling to keep up. Suddenly a mage who I didn't even realize was there hurls a volley of flames and the Curator lurches. I unload with my backstab and flash back into visibility.*

*I hurt it. It kills me. Then the mage kills it.*

*A dagger appears on the screen, one of the three items the Curator dropped.*

*"Oh! That matches my other one!" I exclaim.*

*The raid leader awards me the item. "Sasha's getting a matching set!"*

*I don't realize it at the time, but no one involved in this situation sees Phill, other than my wife, who can literally SEE me. This group thinks that on the other side of the keyboard somewhere there's a pale, petite girl with dark hair and pointy ears moving Sasha around Azeroth.*

*I'll get better at this game, but right now, as Illidan Stormrage later screams at me, I am "not prepared!"*

This story starts the same each time I tell it.

It started innocently enough. To any non-academic readers, one of the rites of passage for those of us in the academy is to conduct a significant piece of research and to write a dissertation. For my fellow academics reading, this book was, loosely, my dissertation, in the same way that a bag of flour and some eggs are a cake. But I started from a point I think many young scholars start from: I knew what I wanted to know, but I wasn't precisely sure *how to find it out*. A friend had turned me on to the game *World of Warcraft*, and other than having an aversion to reac-

tion to the Tauren race, for reasons I'll get to later in this chapter, I was impressed with what Blizzard had created. During the brief time I had played, looking for something to take my mind off the other MMO I'd just been researching (a game called *City of Heroes* that did not stand the test of time), I saw the population increase dramatically. I knew that I wanted to look at end-game raiders as a research focus. And I knew that if I wanted to do that long term, I needed to find a game that was going to be around for a while. So, I set about leveling up toons in *WoW*, intent on understanding the game well enough to eventually do the case studies I hoped to complete.

I was faced with a logistical problem: I needed more than one maximum level character if I wanted to look around for raiding guilds. I didn't want to be locked into a single role, and I didn't want to put all my faith on a single server. But leveling characters in the days before experience point inflation, items that could increase experience points incrementally, and the ability to buy level boosts was tedious work. The reality was that I was going to spend some time just playing with random groups and strangers to build a suitable roster to solicit participants.

Along the way, my girlfriend at the time—now my wife, Julie—chose to create a character and join in. She signed up for one of the hardcore RP servers, a place where people were so serious about their role-playing that they used code-switching (usually parenthesis, though one guild we worked with had an entirely separate chat channel that displayed in a different color) for any dialogue that was “out of character.” On this server, she made a female blood elf hunter. She suggested that I make a pal for her toon, so we could behave like a *WoW* version of the movie *Mean Girls*. Adding some *D&D* inspired role-play seemed like it would be a great shot in the arm for my slow trudge to endgame on what was toon five or six. So, I created a female blood-elf rogue who I refer to in other writings by the pseudonym Sasha.

I leveled with Julie, or Jordana, as people in game came to know her. It didn't take long for both of us to fall into consistent characters. Mine was preoccupied with looking stylish, needing her gear to match and often commenting on the style choices of the people we fought. Looking back, it didn't feel like my most well-rounded role-playing effort, but apparently I did better than I thought.

Sasha would later become Kairos, my first raiding toon. But the way he got there from her start is a powerful statement about gaming identi-

ties and digital identities in general. To talk about why, I need to turn to Lisa Nakamura for a moment for some framing.

### LISA NAKAMURA, IDENTITY TOURISTS, AND TURKLE TALK

My consideration of digital identity in *WoW* begins by recognizing and modifying Nakamura's concept of *identity tourism* (2002). It is only logical that identity tourism is at play in a gaming environment like *WoW*. After all, the game begins with a player choosing and customizing a toon to deploy in the game world. This means that gamers start by adopting a new face, a new race, a new name, and presumably a new role, as it is doubtful that many *WoW* players slay dragons for a living. At the same time, each of my participants, and in fact each of the "regular" members of the raiding group, had highly structured, carefully maintained, and constantly written and re-written identities that included, but were certainly not limited to, their roles within the raid group.

### THE REAL, IDENTITY, AND PLAY: CONSTRUCTING VACATION SELVES IN MAGIC CIRCLES

The question I've wrestled with for nearly a decade now is how to differentiate between "in the game" and "in real life" when speaking about players and their characters. The word most often at issue—and the idea most often at issue, to tunnel just a bit deeper—is "real," as in "what is real?" and "are those people real?" When I think "real," I think of Jean Baudrillard.

Digital rhetoric—and in fact much of contemporary science fiction and popular culture—owes a great debt to Baudrillard, as is illustrated by the work of Donna Haraway (1991), Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1998, 2005) and Stuart Moulthrop (1991). A philosopher arguably years ahead of the curve, Baudrillard's contributions to the field's ways of thinking and seeing are many, but the most oft invoked and arguably most powerful is the idea that what is "real" has, due to replication and simulation, become an abstract principle itself. In "the Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard (1994) writes:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of the truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial

resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. (1992, p. 2)

From Baudrillard's perspective, "real" is gone and replaced, or at the very least is so far away that it can no longer be accessed. In one sense, he claims that humanity is so far separated from "real" that real is no longer a word with any true meaning. If the real is gone or inaccessible, how does one ever determine what is "real?" On the other hand, however, I would suggest that an equally generous reading of Baudrillard is this: if the real is gone, it means that those things oft considered "obvious" fabrications are as *real* as anything else. In other words, there isn't *really* a profound separation between "in *real* life" and "in-game *real*," other than in the clear division made by players of "IRL" being a domain outside of game space.

This version of "real" has a direct and tangible impact on my research hypotheses. One of the assertions I set out to prove or disprove in this research project was that gamers, acting to one degree or another as identity tourists, will tend to play with other gamers who will assist them in practices that allow the gamer to own his or her constructed identity and feel as if they are truly experiencing it—to make it "real."

What I anticipated I would see, based on previous experiences and earlier research, is that gamers would craft identities that complement their play style and goals, and that once those identities were established, the player would do all he or she could to maintain and cultivate that identity, seeking specific types of groups and doing specific sorts of in-game activities.

To begin to understand a gamer's digital identity, first one must understand the game space itself, as identity formation in gaming is so intimately tied to the interface and the gaming space, or in other words the rules that bound that "reality." Gaming studies has tried to designate names for this space before: "game world," "virtual world," "synthetic world" (Castronova, 2005), "Affinity space" (Gee, 2007), etc. but the most suited label for this communal space comes from the work of Johan Huizenga who referred to it as "the magic circle." Huizenga<sup>7</sup> described the magic circle:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand . . . The arena, the card-table, the magic circle,

the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (1972, n. pag.)

In other words, gamers visit a place within this magic circle, in the case of *WoW* gamers a place called Azeroth, which is “like” the real world but is cordoned off, made special by its use in play. And in this magic circle, gamers assume specific identities that could be—and often are—quite different from their identities in the real world. In this space, I assert, they will join and mesh well with—ultimately “staying with”—groups that share their basic desires in relation to what, exactly, they do inside that magic circle, in Azeroth. In other words, they will want to play with other toons that allow them to have a coherent, “real,” in-game experience. A gamer, for example, who wants desperately to defeat whatever the game’s current end boss is will not be satisfied, and will not find a real, resonating identity, with a group of gamers who would rather only run raid instances from a year ago that are now “easy to roflstompwn.” It’s akin to setting the goal of eating at Outback Steakhouse but riding with five people who are going to The Olive Garden. There’s no Bloomin’ Onion at the end of the ride.<sup>8</sup> Gamer identities are wrapped up in the choice of where the gamer “is” or “is going,” as different types of things happen in different gaming spaces. A player has to be in the right place, at the right time, to craft the right identity.

### **A LOOKING GLASS: NAKAMURA, IDENTITY TOURISM, AND IDENTITIES AT PLAY**

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the things that I do, methodologically, is to treat the work of other scholars the way I would treat any other story as a storyteller; as long as I’m not doing harm, I often play with ideas a bit, mixing discarded pieces to forge a lens for looking at something with an Indigenous way without stepping away from existing scholarship. One of the scholars I adore is Lisa Nakamura. My first academic publication was a review of one of her books. I think her work is tremendously important. My favorite element of her work is a metaphor that feels like the perfect fit for a mixed-blood Indigenous scholar who is trying to find a foot hold: identity tourism.

Identity tourism was:

. . . [using] race and gender as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without “real life” consequences. Like tourists who become convinced that their travels have shown them the real “native” life, these identity tourists often took their virtual experiences as other-gendered and other-raced avatars as some kind of lived truth.” (2002, p. 14)

Nakamura continued, “. . . the identities users choose say more about what they want than who they are.” (2002, p. 54). While the commentary on tourists and natives hits close to home, I wish to make a step sideways from the specifically racial implications of what Nakamura asserts, so I also refer to:

While these spaces could be categorized as “games” [speaking of MOOs and chat rooms] they are also theatrical and discursive spaces where identity is performed, swapped, bought and sold . . . when users create characters to deploy in these spaces, they are electing to perform versions of themselves. (2002, p. xv)

There is certainly a way in which Nakamura’s identity tourism can be read as essentially raced, just as there is a way it can be read as a pessimistic lens for studying online identity, a heuristic where the other is being perpetually marginalized. I do not intend to argue here that race isn’t central to Nakamura’s work because it is, and I, likewise, see it as an imperative to carefully research race in cyberspace.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, I firmly believe, as a lens, Identity Tourism is a powerful tool for viewing game generated toons (or avatars, or characters) even if the race element is, for the moment, dislocated from being the primary focus. I instead stress two key elements of Nakamura’s heuristic:

1. The metaphor itself is highly useful because it lays things bare for us to observe; across my research, players talk about *WoW* as a place to “get away” from their IRL lives. They are on “vacation” as “others,” though I wouldn’t stress the Other with a capital “O” in my own analysis. The game is also awash with lands filled with different virtual races, and travel itself is a key element in the gaming world. If ever there has been a space where a person can vacation as other, games are that place. I can, by holding alt+tab while composing this very document, transport myself from my office to a desert in Tanaris where I, as a tiny goblin

decked in blood-red armor who just happens to be able to turn into a dragon, dig for relics from an ancient troll empire that (virtual) time has buried in the (virtual) sand.

2. Nakamura clearly, eloquently articulates the nature of *performing* identity online; gamers are not specifically equal to their toons, but that performative element—practiced by the gamer, author, or the toon or virtual identity—is currently under-theorized and under-studied, as it is happening in more and more spaces to varying degrees. Nick Yee (2013) explores this in *The Proteus Paradox*.

Utilizing Nakamura's work in this way—looking at the framework of practices of performing identity and crafting an online self—allows for an introspection into Sasha that revealed something that to this day causes me to draw diagrams and make lists of criteria. James Paul Gee talked about a “James Gee” and a “Bead Bead” (2003) in an attempt to figure out which he was while gaming. I often ask if I was Sasha or if Sasha was someone else, a stylish, oddly loving assassin with a passing resemblance to Bjork.

Scholars must be careful not to ignore when reading Nakamura that while the “real life” that supports the digital identity might be obscured from view, it is still present, and it does important work in shaping the gamer's digital identity. In this sense, then, a gamer's digital identity is comprised of fragments of the “real” person, the user who sits at the keyboard or input device, who fills in the gaps in the virtual figure—the toon, the avatar—to create what others see, hear, read, and react to in the game space.

Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen*, noted that “[a]s players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (1995, p. 12). The stress is rooted in the idea of authoring not just a character but also a self. Gaming is “like” writing a story for a character, but it also isn't, because the character is also just as much the player as it is not. As Turkle wrote, “[the MUD] gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones” (1995, p. 12). Stress here “play,” to return to Nakamura's idea of the safety and whimsy of the tourist, while at the same time remembering that these are “aspects of the self” and, to that end, are never, one might argue, entirely safe to simply play with.

Later in the book Turkle wrote:

When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. The reconstruction is our cultural work in progress . . . the complex chains of associations that constitute meaning for each individual lead to no final endpoint or core self. (1995, p. 178)

And here the complexity emerges more clearly than it has before; the game self has no “endpoint or core self” and its construction is “our cultural work in progress.”

In his book *Synthetic Worlds*, Edward Castronova took this sense of identity formation in the gaming world a bit further by considering the implications of entry into the world itself:

Media researchers have argued that their studies show how quickly and easily people can “become” the objects they manipulate on computers . . . you go on to click and shape and equip yourself—er this representation of yourself—for as long as you wish to continue playing Dr. Frankenstein. (2005, p. 32)

Of particular importance here is Castronova’s “Dr. Frankenstein” metaphor as he described the creation of an avatar/toon. In Mary Shelley’s novel, Dr. Frankenstein is presented as a scientist obsessed with creating new life and tinkering with the parts—substitute here “fragments” from the previous discussion—of the once-living to make a greater whole that in the end represents the doctor’s obsession as much as anything else, but as popular culture has all but forgotten, Frankenstein was the creator, not the “monster” he produced. The monster carries the name, as most would think not of a doctor but of a beast upon hearing it uttered. Which leads perfectly into Castronova’s next thought:

When you are satisfied with the body you’ve created, you have to name it . . . you realize this place you are going to visit, like Earth itself, has been trammled by many feet other than your own. There as here, names are important for record keeping and reputation-building. Each person must have a name, and each name must be unique and unchanging. If millions of people have traversed this terrain, they now occupy millions of names and you cannot have them. (2005, p. 33).

Castronova is the first of the researchers mentioned here to place such primacy on a name, but more importantly he explained why: name=reputation. Name=record keeping. Later in the book, he continues this line of thought:

. . . a user who appears in a synthetic world for the first time is a completely unknown quantity to those who are already there. She may happen to be one of the most powerful and proficient wizards in the history of Britannia, but in Norrath she is a nobody. Or she may be a mature, kind, well-spoken professor on Earth, but in Norrath no one knows that and she must develop her kindly reputation again from scratch. (2005, p. 92)

Here Castronova brought in to stark clarity the magic circle, even without directly invoking it. He mentions two fictional worlds and a “real” one. They are loosely connected, but knowledge of identities in each world are providence of those worlds. My participants are “citizens” in some sense of Azeroth. I know them, and they know me, there. Beyond that, what we know of each other is circumstantial and incomplete. And that takes me back to Sasha.

### THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TAT . . . HILTED DAGGERS

The nature of storytelling is to build the suspense, to walk a spiral that might seem like a circle if the person weaving it doesn't clearly articulate how each wind of the cord gets deeper to the heart of the issue. As I mentioned, Sasha was my first raiding toon. The road she took to that moment is a curvy one.

Julie, my now-wife then *WoW* partner-in-crime joined an all-women guild on the RP server. Their name was a crass but amusing pun on female anatomy, and in addition to being a well-schooled feminist theorist, their leader RPed as a feminist revolutionary. Julie introduced me to her, and she asked if I'd join the guild because they happened to desperately need a rogue. I pointed out to her, quickly and easily, “you know I'm a guy, right?”

Later I'll wish I'd said that again. Or with more conviction.

But the women didn't mind. I role-played as my female character, but no one was deceived. We spent a little over a month with that guild, and we developed a pretty good rapport with everyone. One night, though, as is quite common, there was a fight between two members of the guild

and the guild disbanded quite suddenly. Guilds end like that, suddenly, just fading to black. The next part happens so quickly I only see it later, when I look at my notes and reassemble what took place.

Julie was in a dungeon group with another woman who was a friend of our now defunct guild. They happened to need a hunter and a rogue, so their guild leader invited Julie. And she invited me. We met, in character, in game. We chatted for a while, as we played a few dungeons.

The next day, I was doing my usual materials gathering and prepping to level another toon when the guild master of our new guild asked if I'd like to group with her to run a few dungeons, which of course I did. We chatted, in character. She sometimes code switched, and so I did, too. But I forgot, or it just never occurred to me, that all she knew of me was that I was a toon who was involved with Julie and from her all-women guild.

Weeks passed, and we raided and ran dungeons on and off. They seemed like nice people. Then one night, the guild leader said, of me, "glad to help my girl out." Not a big deal at first. Then I noticed it was in parenthesis. She'd codeswitched. She called me, not Sasha but the person behind the keyboard, her "girl."

I mentioned this to Julie, and she suggested that maybe the guild leader was just being playful or got her codeswitch mixed up. Julie told her, jokingly, "she's mine." And we went back to talking in character, with me honestly writing off my thinking I saw anything to the fact that I was reading with a researcher's eyes. As we played, without me knowing, Julie had a long talk with the guild master about how we'd met, that we'd been together for a while, etc. What apparently didn't happen was any pronoun use.

A few days later, the guild master told me in codeswitched "IRL" talk that she didn't want me to ever feel uncomfortable. I told her I wouldn't, not realizing yet what she meant. Then she told me she was glad that Julie and I didn't mind being out. I was afraid I was reading in again, but I also felt like we'd entered awkward territory. So, I said to her, "you know we're a straight couple, right?" Her response was "oh, wow. No. I didn't."

Remember earlier that I mentioned I would wish I'd said "you know I'm a guy, right?" a second time. I never did say it though. Looking back on it, I am not sure why I didn't. I didn't have any intention of being confusing or deceptive, and I certainly wasn't trying to cultivate the *Three's Company* style sitcom moment that was to come. But I expressed that

Julie and I were not, as the guild master had thought, a lesbian couple. I thought things were settled. I felt better.

About a week later, the guild master asked me out-of-character if we could chat for a bit. The discussion went deep. Fast. And it was about the most sensitive of topics. It was something incredibly personal. When she finished, she said “it’s good to share that with another woman.”

I think I must have gasped loud enough for my neighbors to hear me. And much like the ending of *The Usual Suspects* where the coffee cup falls, I saw what the guild had never put together. The guild had ALWAYS thought I was a woman. It was my wife, Julie, who they assumed was the male member of our couple when I explained that we weren’t both female. I excused myself, logged out, and called Julie. She laughed; then I told her that I’d been confided in, girl-to-girl about something sensitive. I didn’t know what to do.

I sat there thinking about the idea of identity tourism as it would occur in role-playing games. It seems like it’s truly what Nakamura suggests, a chance to vacation as something one isn’t, to “play” at another role to try it on without actually taking on consequences. But in that moment, when I’d been confided in as a woman, I felt a huge burden, an overwhelming pain. I hadn’t lied, at least in any active way, but I was and am a committed role-player. Because I hadn’t overtly tipped my hand, and because I forgot to explicitly state my gender, I’d caused a deception. I wasn’t experiencing what it meant to be a woman, but I was experiencing something that took a toll and carried risk. Something was happening to me as my story and Sasha’s crashed into each other.

I learned two things. The first is that a digital identity can have huge ramifications on real life. I was deeply troubled by what Sasha had caused. I ended up leaving the guild and the server, changing my character’s gender and name. Kairos went on to be my first toon with the members of the guild I’d end up spending my nine months of deep research with. I couldn’t keep being Sasha. I had to erase her.

That’s the other thing that was abundantly clear in that moment. Or perhaps I should say was abundantly *unclear*. Was I Sasha? Was Sasha Phill? There was never a question that the toons I played with the Flashpoint guild (my primary participants) were me. My main toon had my name. He spoke like me, even when in role-play mode, something most of those members didn’t do often anyway. But Sasha was a *creation*. If we’d been face to face, or I’d been using the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) that I’d use for my later raiding, no one would have been able to

mistake things. But Sasha was apparently so authentic to the members of her guild that they thought she was real. More importantly, they never knew me. During the time that I was playing Sasha, the Phill that I am, the author of this book, didn't exist. My other participants told me to wear this as a badge that indicated "baller status" as one would say, because I was so talented at role-playing that I seemed more authentically female than my wife. But even all these years later I feel ill at ease when I think about those experiences, and I certainly didn't feel like I had done well at something. Was I in the throes of the Proteus effect, behaving like Sasha because I looked like Sasha and was addressed as Sasha? Was I just role-playing well? Perhaps most confusing, did I miss her, do I miss her? What does it say about me that I remember how she thought or could speak to you with her voice?

### SASHA GOES KAIROS, AND I MEET SALLY

On the new server, Kairos, formerly Sasha, made quick friends. This server wasn't designated as hardcore role-play, but I wanted to create a back-story to explain the character being high level, as this toon had basically been eviscerated by moving, disconnected from his (her) past. I decided to go with a clear aspect of myself (my Phill self) and to react to one of my first moments of *WoW* displeasure. The Tauren, who I mentioned previously, are a minotaur race, half human/half cattle. This didn't seem like such a bad idea for a fictional race to me, until I saw their home city. The Tauren lampoon plains Indian culture—tipis, dream catchers, tribal patterns that are shockingly similar to real ones, a reverence for nature and "the great hunt." The Tauren were even displaced and marched from their homeland into the desert. It was almost too lazy how the fictional race insulted my ancestors.

So Kairos, now a male elf rogue thanks to a fifteen dollar investment in *Warcraft* witness relocation, ended up with the role-play back story that he was an elf born in the Tauren homeland as a slave, raised by a Tauren family as their own, and hence identified as Tauren. It really only made sense to me, but it allowed me to role-play some of my concerns about racially passing, about my own mixed identity, etc. While running around the Tauren city trying to gather enough items to make my elf look sort of Tauren, I met Sally, a raid PUGger looking for a rogue.

Sally and I shared a similar sense of humor, and over several weeks we found we were both online at the same time and wanted to run the

same dungeons, so we teamed up frequently. I told her the story of Kairos, then I told her about my misunderstanding on the other server in the most broad strokes possible. Sally shared with me that she chose a Tauren because she was first generation Mexican American, and as I quickly learned, part of her in-game gimmick—her version of RP—was swearing in Spanish when she made a mistake.

One night, however, the following dialogue took place.

Sally: [In Spanglish, a fast string that, from what I followed was basically “holy crap I messed up so bad just now” along with a strong lacing of profanity]

Guy 1: Shut up, you fucking beaner!

*\*I know it sounds like a flair for the dramatic, but I swear I could hear Sally gasp into her headset\**

Me: Was that entirely necessary? *\*I know, I talk like a nerd\**

Sally: What the fuck, dude?

Guy 1: Don't talk like one of those bastards who steals all our jobs. They need to all fucking die. Go the fuck back home!

*\*I start to speak again, but on my audio recording, I can't hear what I'm saying, as Sally starts to yell\**

Sally: Who are you, Bill Fucking O'Reilly? I thought we were all here to have fun, not to start a bunch of political shit!

Guy 2: What'd I get myself into here?

Guy 1: I'm just saying, it's disrespectful to me for you to talk like a fucking wetback when we're trying to kill stuff.

Sally: So I can't talk like myself?

At that point, Sally did what she'd later refer to as “going ballistic.” She called the guy, among other things, a “racist cracker,” swore in ways that made me blush a bit, and then logged off. After about twenty minutes of calming her down in a chat window I convinced Sally to return and we played out the night.

Sally had a fictional face to use as a buffer, and the nature of roleplay to use as a buffer, but the racist behavior of another gamer still injured her. She felt emotional pain and needed to talk about it, much like I, that first night, needed to vent over my unwillingness to accept that the Tauren and their gigantic dream catchers were “okay.” In that sense, we are indeed identity tourists, but I would argue that in an era of “stand your ground,” it isn’t safe to walk around as an identity tourist any more than it is to walk around as a racial minority. Pain induced over a network might not result in physical harm, but the emotional damage is every bit as tangible. In short, identity tourism will allow a white person to vacation as a minority, a white male to experience role-playing a woman, but racial minorities and women will never escape society’s oppression through a simple character mask.

### Soooo . . .

These are two accounts of my early *WoW* research, and while the sharing of these stories might not seem like research “data,” the unit of observation here is the story itself. Looking back at the construction of the lens I’ve presented thus far, the core of the study can now be witnessed in action. Sasha is my “Frankenstein,” to follow from Castronova, an attempt to be an identity tourist that, as Turkle indicated, led to no core self. Sasha was an enacted story, some fragment of my identity that was able to grow and become a realized whole. Sasha was a narrative in that she was a story told to bring people together, but her actual existence, her “reality,” was based entirely on the interplay of the narrative she was telling with the narrative of others. The polyvocal voice of me-as-Sasha and the voices of the two guilds came together to build a robust identity. How robust? Sasha had agency. She did things Phill couldn’t (or wouldn’t, he wouldn’t be fit to). Sasha had impact.

Sally’s narrative operates to reveal the opposing side, to illustrate what happens when the digital identity is utilized in an attempt to mask the real, to create distance. Sally wrote herself as Mexican American in an environment that didn’t intrinsically have that subject, position, or role. There is no “America” in *WoW*. There are, strictly speaking, no “Mexicans” on *WoW*. But the distance of using this artifice, of building an identity that mimics her reality, left Sally exposed to the racism of others. This shouldn’t be surprising, but it does counter both Yee’s Proteus effect and Nakamura’s identity tourism, while it also puts a dent in

Turkle's belief that there is no core self in digital space. A tourist Proteus, Sally should have felt powerful and imposing because of her huge male Tauren toon, but instead the essential thing—what Sally used as the very first phrases to describe herself (Mexican American, female) rose to the surface of her construction. Her “Frankenstein's monster” was no less carefully constructed than mine, and instead of erring toward accidental deception hers leaped head first into being overtly open. But the safety that she told me she expected from playing a character that wasn't visually female wasn't built strong enough to shield her (she shared with me numerous accounts of players making sexual comments to her when she played as a female elf toon). Sally was a story, a story that she authored through her own agency.

The difference is the core of understanding the sliding scale of *WoW* character identities. As I mentioned before, Sasha was not a deceptive practice, but she was never the less a clean fiction, not precisely the same as but akin to what Jean Baudrillard refers to as a hyperreal, a “real without origin or reality” (1983, n. pag.). Sasha took on the role that I theoretically should have occupied with those players while also being the narrative construction that was Sasha, the toon. By contrast, Sally (the person behind the Sally toon) showed clearly through the toon. One of these two states of identity applied to each of my study participants. Either their toon creations were a fragment of their real identity that built its own story and agency, or their toon was an almost-accurate reflection of the person sitting at the keyboard, a sort of remixed identity. In the next chapter, I'll introduce you to that cast of characters and talk about how their identities developed over a longer period of time, separate from these compelling flashes.

### 3 “Know Your Role and (probably never) Shut Your Mouth”: Digital Identity in *World of Warcraft*

*There are ten of us, standing in a circle, staring at a huge bell. We're about to find out how many adventurers it takes to kill a blind dragon named Atramedes.*

*All around the room there are ornate ceremonial stands holding lavish gongs. They form a pair of abstract brackets—five on each side of the room—confining us inside a round portion of the chamber. Above us, there's a loud, thwapping sound, like a flag in the wind. Over and over—thwap, thwap, thwap.*

*I can hear Lint explaining what is about to happen, his gravelly voice low and calm. He's well into explaining the encounter, and I'm pacing out my own steps—slide to the left, slide to the right, run to the center, then toward the bell. I check my axes, make sure I have the right gear, glance down and notice that Salty has set out food. I eat. Lint is still speaking. He's about to remind the group's one mage, the only person who is both a ranged attacker and has the ability to instantly move twenty yards by blinking, of her duties in the fight.*

*“And Sally, your job here is going to be to hit those gongs, at the times we talked about. When the dragon starts his major cast, then any time someone has the fire trailing after them during his flight phase. Got it?”*

*Atramedes is a blind dragon. He can't see us, nor will he ever see us. But he can detect us via the sound waves he shrieks out. That's where the gongs come in. When Sally hits one, it is so loud that the dragon locks onto the noise and forgets about the ten little raiders poking it with their sharp sticks.*

*Normally, people respond to Lint with a “sure,” or “right-o” or “I’m on it.” I usually say “word up,” but that’s because I listened to too much rap as a lil goblin.*

*Sally is silent, but her push-to-talk is on. We can hear her sigh.*

*“Got it?”*

*She replies, “Why am I on gongs?”*

*“We talked about this. You can blink from gong to gong. No one else in the group can.”*

*“Can’t you hit the gongs?”*

*“I’m tanking.”*

*“Can’t Salty do it?”*

*“He’s in melee range here. He’d have to run way out. It’s easy. You just go in a big circle from gong to gong while we fight the dragon.”*

*The conversation ends with Sally agreeing to hit the gongs, but only after suggesting that three other people do it instead. Lint slams his mace into the bell and the massive blind dragon descends upon us. We all launch into motion, working in a circle around the creature, darting back and forth to dodge the beast’s many attacks. Sally hits a first gong, and the dragon rears back. Things are going well.*

*Then the dragon takes the sky. As it happens, he chooses to spew his fire breath at me. I take off running, my tiny legs churning as fast as they possibly can. I feel the fire licking at my heels. I use my rocket jump ability to propel forward. “Gong!” I call out. Nothing happens. “I need a gong, Sally!” Still nothing. I’m out of room. I hit the wall, like a cartoon coyote that fell for the fake cave opening the roadrunner painted on a cliff face. The fire beam hits me. I die, falling back first to the floor, my axes crossed neatly across my charred chest. The dragon’s fire takes off toward a hunter, who also screams “Gong! I NEED A GONG!” Nothing happens. He, too, perishes. This pattern continues, as two more die.*

*The dragon lands, and with almost half of our contingent dead, we just don’t have enough forces to make a stand. One by one, the other six fall. As our ghosts come to claim our bodies, Lint asks the question I am sure all of us are thinking, “Sally, what happened with the gongs there?”*

*“Oh my god, you guys! I missed,” she says, plainly. No apologies. No real sense of concern. “I don’t see why I have to . . .”*

*Listening in, Iceman cuts her off “how the FUCK do you miss a gong four times? Is your mouse dead? You just click the fucking gong! You can’t ‘miss’—it’s not a skill. The gong isn’t defending itself. You just click!”*

*Sally logs off. We don't see her again until the next day, when she will claim her network connection cut out.*

*And for at least that night, the dragon gets the best of us.*

Identities operate in interesting ways when analyzing interpersonal dynamics across several months of following the raid group, as well as their behavior in game but outside of the specific “raid” time/space. This works hand-in-hand with the idea of *gaming roles*, a concept that is of tremendous importance to a MMORPG. As I will illustrate in this chapter through a careful look at my study data, gamer roles orbit digital identity in interesting ways. The most important way is this: incongruent senses of gamer role will lead to fragmented digital identity and group chaos. This class can be seen by looking at the leader of the guild I started my research with, Sally of TheSkullz, and the way her misunderstanding of her own role and the way she navigated her identity led to a breakdown in the guild’s—and raid group’s—ability to proceed.

The specific example that opens this chapter, which I will elaborate upon later, surfaces the key issues that digital identity presents in collaborative gaming space. First and foremost, the “toon” on the screen is an individual, but that individual—while not “precisely” the user as I discussed last chapter—cannot be neatly separated from the user, or perhaps the better way to interpret it is that the toon contains large portions of that user. The relevance here is that in some ways toons are not functionally different from the avatars of message boards of old, a visual representation of a person communicating so that the person can be more easily remembered. But as we look at gamers, we must also make every attempt to understand the fusion of user and creation—of actor or author and authored creation—in order to really understand how any person authors an identity in digital space. As the members of TheSkullz and later Flashpoint illustrate in this chapter, the negotiation is complex and dynamic. And we start, again, by looking at what is “real.”

### REALLY, THOUGH?

Be careful not to ignore that while the “real life” that supports the digital identity might be obscured from view or buried in a well-crafted character, it is still present, and it does important work in shaping the gamer’s digital identity. My goblin Death Knight is, as one might guess, a goblin. He’s green, and he’s short. He wears elaborate armor that he

acquired during his many raids, evidence of where he's been and what he's done. He charges in first for a fight, throwing clouds of ice at his enemies, has a penchant for yelling "wizzup?" as he attacks things, and he has a rather extensive collection of weapons and clothing, including a set of robes and swords that have no actual value to him as a competitor but that allow him to play "Jedi." And there, finally, at the end, is the evidence of a fragment of Phill, the researcher. There's no reason for my toon to know *Star Wars*, but I do, as do my participants, and the facts that (a) I sometimes wear a set of gear that makes my toon look like a Jedi and that (b) "the backward speak I do" is reminiscent of how Yoda might talk are very much a part of my toon's identity, but these facets exist only because I, just as much of a nerd as my creation, have *Star Wars* toys on the desk where I play. It is from this position that we can view collaborative-gamer digital identity—as a fusion, with the toon being a colorful, rich, but incomplete figure that is made whole by fragments of the user that slide into the gaps.

As Lint, my paladin research participant, once told me, he's clearly not Lint "IRL": he's not someone who leads a group of raiders to go slay things; he doesn't carry a gigantic mace; and, as he pointed out in one of the rare moments where we were speaking about our lives outside of *WoW*, the driving force in his IRL world—being a single father to two children—is an element of his personality that is, by his claim, nowhere to be found in Lint. At the same time, however, traces of that family man do leak into Lint, in his patience in dealing with immature moments from raid members and his tendency to every now and again explain something as if he is speaking not to his fellow gamers but to his three-year-old daughter, saying things like, "watch out for the big bad fire!"

As I mentioned in chapter two, in *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee reflected on his own experience as a gamer to bring issues of identity into his discussion, as he contemplated whether or not he plays the role-playing game *Arcanum* as James Paul Gee, Bead-Bead, or one of three hybrid forms of "James Paul Gee as Bead-Bead" (with emphasis on either his own name, his characters' name, or the "as" between them to indicate different perspectives [2003, pp. 51–66]). Gee's division of identity into a potential triad with two concrete choices (James Paul Gee and Bead-Bead) and the option of the joining action (the playing—in his construction "as") shows how factors of each side of the screen, as it were, might bleed together in a holistic consideration of gamer identity; though, ultimately I would assert that

the only answer Gee could come to is that his third suggestion—with stress on the “as” in the middle—is the only plausible identity that exists in *Arcanum*. He’s not James in that game. And Bead-Bead isn’t a James-Free Zone. He’s the fusion of both.

### **SPLITTING SKULLZ: IDENTITY CLASHES AND POWER STRUGGLES**

When studying issues of identity in a group of ten, such as the raid group I researched here, it is important to consider how identities and roles weave into the group as a whole. In the next chapter, I will delve much deeper into what this means in terms of a collaborative identity. For now, however, I wish to stick with this consideration: what becomes of a digital identity when it clashes with how the toon is perceived? In my study, it was during the moments of dissonance when issues of identity and role were the focus.

In the early part of my research there is one moment where the research showed a major moment of fracture, the night when Lint and company (myself included) left TheSkullz—the guild they were in when I began my research—to start Flashpoint. While a raid group splitting isn’t at all atypical in the raiding world<sup>10</sup>, the interpersonal problems leading to the split emerged from specific issues related to identity and roles clashing. I believe through understanding what causes a raid-group fissure like this one, I can illuminate the importance of the harmonious intermingling of digital identities and the need for understanding that while these roles are individually adopted, they still call for give and take, and the personalities and desires of the people involved matter a great deal to the identities of the toons and the tellings of these stories. The raid has to take place as a practical shared reality, but it’s not all about what happens in that shared reality—other factors have dramatic impact. It’s not, for example, as simple as saying “we need X player to fill Y role,” though the whole premise of a PUG is based on that concept. This hasn’t proven to be the case in practice, and that makes perfect sense: the digital identities of the participants matter, too.

### **TAKING X-RAYS OF SKULLZ TO LOOK FOR FRACTURES**

What follows is the story of Sally and Lint, but it’s also essentially the story of TheSkullz, at least as a raiding guild. Allow me first to briefly

reintroduce the two as players on the field. Sally<sup>11</sup>, playing a Troll hunter in this scenario, was the guild master. She externally presented as considering this to mean she had the final word on any decision that needed to be made. She would often make public declarations, such as, “No, we aren’t going to do that,” or “you need to be on at 10 pm if the raid is at 10 pm,” but in reality she often consulted with Lint before making these public declarations in private chat (a private chat I was party to thanks to their willingness to share with me as I did my research). She was charming, engaging, and highly talkative (described at least twice in my research as being “auctioneer-like”). She was not, however, in the opinion of my other participants, particularly talented at the game itself. This is not to say she was bad; she wasn’t a poor player. The level of execution for the others in this guild was just abnormally high. Sally presented as knowing exactly what was going on, but in my research interviews she was quick to point out that she didn’t “really know” raid encounters and wasn’t interested in learning them well enough to teach others. She left that work to Lint, and when talking to me she indicated that she actually liked it that way. She didn’t want it to be her job.

Lint, meanwhile, was the group’s raid leader. “Raid leader” is in itself a peculiar designation, as it is strictly player-community created. “Guild Master” is a label that Blizzard and the *WoW* rule set demand exist—someone must be in charge of, create, administer, and pay for things for a guild. But raid leaders are a social construct<sup>12</sup>: groups appoint someone to run the raid, to call out orders, and to understand and explain strategies. TheSkullz raids were Lint’s to lead, and when raiding Sally was supposed to, and initially did, take a back seat and simply be a member of the raid group. Lint asked me specifically to take note of Sally saying exactly that, and she did, frequently, in my research.

This dynamic changed about a month into my research when TheSkullz realized they were stuck at a particular plateau point for three weeks—they couldn’t complete the Atramedes encounter, the event that I used to open this chapter, a battle with a blind dragon. Lint, as raid leader, had a solution in mind. He knew another highly talented player, Iceman, who used to be in TheSkullz but who left to join a hardcore progression guild, a guild that had completed the first raid tier already. Iceman, however, missed his friends, and when Lint asked him for advice on the problems that TheSkullz were having, Iceman expressed a desire to “come back home.” So, Lint asked Sally if Iceman and a friend could

join the guild to help with the raid difficulties, and Sally—again, by Lint’s account—expressed no problems with this.

At the same time, Sally as GM had decided to try to find a solution to the problem. She recruited Teddy, a Paladin tank; this was a player who provided the exact same roles that Lint played in the raid. When I checked in with Lint the day after this recruiting move, he was furious that Sally recruited a new main tank to replace him, in the raid that he led, without consulting him. He also wasn’t happy that she’d brought in other new players she had promised raid spots to, as Lint was not a fan of changing group composition mid-raid and already had a full roster. He also told me that Sally had volunteered him to run a second “alternate” raid run each week on off-days, meaning that Lint would be in charge of leading a three-to-four-hour raid five nights a week.<sup>13</sup>

This was the moment where things fell apart. The next week, Lint invited Iceman’s friend, Leah, into the guild, and there was a slight rumble from a few people in the public guild chat channel. I was, at the time, interviewing someone, so we were both watching the discussion while not actually participating in it. It wasn’t terribly specific, but the tension was apparent:

Sally: Who is that?

Lint: She’s a holy priest for the raid group

Sally: The name looks familiar

Lint: It’s [gave her real name] from [named the server where she played with Iceman]

Sally: mmmm . . .

At this point in the discussion, Sally’s boyfriend logs in. There’s about five minutes of public chat silence—Lint would tell me later there was a fight happening between Sally and him in the officer chat channel, a channel I couldn’t see or log. Then they spoke again in the public channel:

Lint: So if I invite Iceman, is [the boyfriend] going to rage quit or something?

Sally: Iceman can’t join the guild.

Lint: But we talked about this . . .

Sally: No. We'll gkick<sup>14</sup> him if you invite.

Lint then logged out, leaving an in-game status message of “fuck this!” I had not observed—in my month previous—any sort of dissent between Lint and Sally other than the anger over the second raid group. Particularly in the public guild chat channel, it always presented as Lint staying out of any decisions that weren't raid specific and Sally referring any questions or concerns about raiding to Lint. The two seemed not only “professional” and well aware of their respective roles, but previous to this they'd shown a great deal of comradely and mutual respect.

When I next spoke to Lint, he said:

You remember that run a few weeks ago? [I did—I actually logged it as a pilot to make sure my recording methods were working, so I had all of it—numbers, chat, voice, etc.]. Iceman tried to help Sally play better and she rage quit. Apparently [her boyfriend] thinks that Iceman—and me, and you, for that matter—are hitting on Sally when we talk to her in game and on vent<sup>15</sup>, so he went nuts over Iceman offering help. And Sally doesn't like it because she thinks she's better than Iceman. Last week she told me it was fine to bring Iceman back. But now she's saying that [boyfriend] will gkick him, and probably me, if I even invite him. Fuck this, you know? I'm running these raids. I want to play with the people I want to play with. She can't just throw someone in who wants to do my job, and start replacing my regulars, and then tell me I can't make my own moves. It's my group!

He went on to explain to me that before I came into the group, Sally had made decisions based on getting gear and achievements for her boyfriend even when it didn't mesh with the rest of the guild's goals, and he told me about how her boyfriend would relay his displeasure to Lint through Sally while raiding if, for example, a dropped item the boyfriend could use was awarded to any other player. Lint also stressed that he'd carefully explained to Sally that he wanted Iceman back because Iceman and Leah knew how to complete the encounter that the group was hung up on.

This was Sally's account, when I inquired as to what happened:

[My boyfriend] hates Iceman after that ICC run. He said he won't play with him. I don't care, I used to like him. If you guys wanted him around it'd be fine. But [my boyfriend] said he'd

gkick Lint and his friends if he brings in Iceman. I can't talk to him when he gets like this. I just do what he says.<sup>16</sup>

From the outside, the situation looked grim<sup>17</sup>, and I thought that just weeks after seeing Sally attacked for her race that I was now seeing her boyfriend employ scary gender dynamics. On the one side, there was a raid leader who'd been undermined and was unable to do what he had planned to do, and on the other side, there was a guild master who had made a stand and would have to either back pedal or risk alienating a number of her raiders. The next day, Lint told me that he spoke with Ice-man and that they had decided that if Sally wouldn't change her mind they'd just start a new guild and take whoever wanted to go with them.

Lint tried to get Sally to talk to him about a solution that he had come up with: Iceman and Leah would be in the "alt" run with Lint, and Lint would use his other toon—which was also raid ready—with Sally and her boyfriend in the "main" raid group. Sally's response was, "you just want to ditch us!" and she wouldn't explore the idea any further. Lint tried for an entire night to get Sally to talk to him about the situation, and then he quit TheSkullz and started Flashpoint before going to sleep. The next day, Sally would kick Lint's alt toons, along with the alt toons of everyone who had followed him to the new guild.

Sally told me that she felt like Lint "betrayed her." But she also came clean about a number of things: (a) She had told Lint it was okay to bring in Iceman, (b) it was she who didn't want Iceman around, and she had used her boyfriend as a scapegoat because she knew he wouldn't speak to any of us anyway so we'd never find out she lied, and (c) she had recruited Teddy because she was afraid that Lint had too much "power" in the group and wanted to show him that he "could be easily replaced."

### **SAY WHAT NOW? ROLES AND PLAYING**

This exchange in relation to the dilemma faced by TheSkullz and their Atramedes plateau illustrates that the relationships between people in an online game are role-based and complex. For as often as Lint or Sally said "it's just a game," and they both did, often, the data doesn't show anyone involved treating this as low stakes—emotion is present, identity issues are foregrounded, and these things occur over and over in the logs of those encounters. Issues of betrayal, people feeling undermined or undervalued, in-fighting over a person's level of skill or capacity to do the job, a desire for power and control, etc. There was also an interesting

dynamic of ownership: does Lint own the group if he leads it, or does the guild master own the group? Does the group own the group?

The problem can be fairly easily understood if one looks to gamer roles. While considering a way to define the roles gamers take on, I came upon a useful heuristic from Chris Anderson, the curator of TED's web collections. He offers this definition of an online "crowd:"

A crowd is simply a community, any group of people with a shared interest . . . The community needs to contain at least a few people capable of innovation. But not everyone in the community need be. There are plenty of other necessary roles:

- the trend-spotter, who finds a promising innovation early
- the evangelist, who passionately makes the case for idea x or person y
- the super-spreader, who broadcasts innovations to the larger group
- the skeptic, who keeps the conversation honest
- general participants, who show up, comment honestly, and learn

Different people may occupy these various roles at different times, including that of innovator. Innovation is a response to a particular set of challenges or inspirations. (2010, n. pag.)

Anderson's conception of the crowd works well for his consideration of how video communities (speaking specifically of YouTube in that case) operate in terms of user role. With some slight tweaks, it also serves as an excellent breakdown of the roles of *WoW* gamers as observed in this study. Using his comments as a lead, I developed what you see in

Table 3. Gamer Roles (adapted from Anderson, 2011).

Name of Role	Work It Does
Innovator/ Bleeding Edge Raider	Quite literally innovates. As frontline raiders, these are the people in the <i>WoW</i> community who experience content the second it is “live” on the servers (or even before that on the public test realm). They learn the encounters and the maps so that they can lead and inform others. They would be the prime producers of gaming memes in this particular system.
Trend-spotter	Almost identical to what Anderson says in the quote above: there are players who are particularly talented at watching specific sources and comparing early theories to see what is the “best” way to do certain things in-game. They don’t do the innovating, but they find it and sometimes repackage it into something far better than the innovator’s initial product. These would be the people responsible for mutation and replication of memes.
The Pitch (wo) Man	This is the person who speaks out emphatically and loyally for idea X or the person with idea Y. The community might call them “homers” or “fanboys.”
Memetic Carriers	These are the people who see the new material and spread it to the masses (the virus, if you will).
The Skeptic	This is the person who keeps everyone honest by expressing concerns about the viability of the meme/method. This person could often fly in the face of evidence to speak for something that might end up making him/her an innovator by proposing a better/more functional solution (or even just a parallel solution that works).
Typical Raider	This is a person who shows up to play, learns, adapts, and rarely innovates or specifically seeks out information to spread, but who executes and shares and takes part in the full process. Every gamer would, in theory, occupy this space at some points.

These definitions, while incredibly similar to Anderson’s originals, are accurate definitions for the roles of my participants. Iceman is an Innovator/Bleeding Edge Raider and a trend-spotter, spending much of his

time split between the Flashpoint raid group and his other raid group learning encounters and researching to figure out better ways to experience the content. The bulk of his comments during raids—nearly ninety percent on average—were directions or helpful anecdotes about upcoming encounters. Salty and Leah are both memetic carriers, and Salty often serves as a pitchman for Lint’s ideas. I am, myself, a typical raider and skeptic, though due to the methods I used to study here, I became everything on the list at one point or another.

A careful reader will notice that I didn’t include Sally and Lint in my quick summation above. That is because the reasons for their conflict come clear upon reflection upon their gamer roles as evidenced in my research data. As I’ve implied, Lint is an Innovator/Bleeding Edge Raider. He served as a teacher and leader for many of the players in TheSkullz and in Flashpoint, and he frequently did pre-release research, as I explore later. Everyone—but Sally, perhaps—saw him as an Innovator and leader; in fact, everyone involved in the study—even Sally—called him “the leader” specifically more than once. His role was unquestioned by anyone in my data. It was clear what he did, and it was clear that he saw himself the way others saw him in relation to the group. His identity was validated.

Sally’s behavior was a pitch woman and a typical raider, but she would also at times refuse to follow direction from Lint or Iceman and had a penchant for ninja log-outs after being told she was doing something wrong, both activities that are inconsistent with any sort of true leadership role. Her boyfriend was a typical raider (or atypical raider, perhaps) who couldn’t be more because he wouldn’t communicate with the group for reasons I will never fully understand because while he consented to my study, he never really said anything to me, either. TheSkullz all, based on my data, saw the couple precisely this way. In fact, while I excluded “troll” from my game roles because it’s not a real fit, nearly everyone (all the participants other than myself) but Sally and her boyfriend used the word “trolling” to describe the couple’s behavior on more than one occasion.

Conflict arises from role confusion on a digital identity level: Lint was what he thought he was, but Sally saw herself one way and the group saw her quite differently; in fact, the group saw her as behaving counter to what Sally claimed she was. No one I spoke to during my research would debate the classification of Lint as an “innovator” or “bleeding edge” raider. My participants likewise saw the majority of TheSkullz,

and later the majority of Flashpoint, as typical raiders and memetic carriers. The problem came with Sally and her boyfriend. Sally considered herself an innovator and a bleeding edge raider, and while she never really specified when she was and was not including her boyfriend in statements, I think she saw him as one as well. She did not behave as an innovator, though. She resisted learning, she refused to do research, she became impatient when the group would try to talk through things, etc. Over sixty percent of her raid comments were simply social chatter with no direct impact on the encounters. She wanted to see quick kills and new gear and then go back to sitting in town chatting with people. She even said, point blank “I’m not going to go watch videos and take notes and stuff. Just pewpew and move on to the next boss.” She wasn’t willing to be what she said she was, or she didn’t see herself clearly.

I would propose, then, that what fragmented TheSkullz wasn’t that the group didn’t have the right mix of people; the problem was that Sally was not acting like what she presumed to be, and her and Lint’s inability to reconcile that created a shifted mutual narrative, which created the impossible moment where the only solution was a split. Sally fell into the chasm between “what she practiced” and “what she believed she was” at the moment of rupture. It turned what was a relatively successful collaboration into a fractured tree of different, variable successes and failures as the members migrated to new groups.

Things ended there for TheSkullz, more or less. After the four members and I “defected” and started Flashpoint with Iceman and Leah, tragedy befell Sally—her mother passed away—and she quit devoting hours and hours a day to playing, as she had to take care of family responsibilities. She spoke to me one last time near the end of my research to tell me that she was doing okay and that she “wish[ed] [she] listened to Lint’s compromise,” because Teddy became “a huge pain-in-the-ass douchebag.” Teddy left TheSkullz when Sally’s mother passed away, and went on to form a new guild himself. As of the time of my last check-in with him, his new guild had experienced very little quantifiable success, though he was happy to be “the boss.” Stryfe, the hunter, went with him, but based on periodic checks of my friends list while conducting observations and interviews, he was rarely online. TheSkullz became a social guild, with Sally and her boyfriend rarely online and no one, really, with the aspirations to lead raids. When I last checked with Sally in August of 2011, TheSkullz roster had shrunk from a high of seventy members

down to twenty-two, and seven of those twenty-two were Sally, her boyfriend and their alts.

### CONCLUSION: DIGITAL IDENTITIES AND KEEPING IT “REAL”

Throughout this chapter I have made subtle moves back toward Baudrillard and the idea of “real” and what real has come to mean in virtual spaces. This is a moment where I want to focus in specifically on what being “real” means in the gaming world. Take, for example, my participants. Lint isn’t any more a Paladin than he is not a Paladin in the particular moment that he is logged into *WoW* and playing as his Paladin. In that moment, I’m a three-and-a-half-foot tall goblin who hangs out with him, taking field notes and cracking jokes. That is how we know each other, and that is how we interacted over the months of my study. He has seen my face in pictures, but he calls me by my goblin’s name, and he makes jokes about the height and appearance of my toon. That’s who I “really” am to Lint. I am not claiming this in the sense that I think Lint is delusional and can’t understand that Phillip Alexander is a now 40-something nerd sitting at a desk. What I mean instead is that our mutual understanding of each other is in the game space and not in IRL space. This is an active choice. Unlike with Sasha before, Lint has never been presented with anything confusing, as I never tried to convince him I wasn’t an academic researcher, and he never tried to deceive me (that I know of). He saw my personal website when I sent him my research solicitation. But I am still that goblin to him on Facebook all these years later.

Herein lies the interesting dilemma: for these moments of identity tourism to work, the participants need to find people who essentially share the deception, or to state it in a way that might sound less negative, people who are moving toward the same narrative ends, who are playing the same game in the same way, need each other for their narrative identities to congeal. “Real,” in this sense, becomes a sliding scale where the most powerful factors are harmony and consistency of narrative. Sally presented as wanting to be in charge. She spoke about wanting to be seen as powerful and in control. She thought she was one of the best players in the game, on the server, and in the guild, and she expressed to me the expectation to be treated as such. Lint didn’t help her to feel that way, so he didn’t work as a part of her narrative reality. Conversely, she didn’t work for his, as he saw her as being masterful at some things but unwilling

to commit to other things. Their only options to move forward were to move forward in different directions. They weren't telling the same story the same way, and Lint's story needed—literally NEEDED—someone who was trying to go the same places at the same speed.

Bear in mind, however, that this entire situation must be understood under the umbrella of “the virtual” being “the real.” It wasn't that the physical person, Sally, couldn't live a life in which she worked and socialized with the real person who plays as Lint; these “real” people—their physical bodies, their biological selves—never encountered each other, nor did they ever see photographs of each other, though they did hear each other's voices in low fidelity VoIP chat. The “reality” where these individuals worked, where the action happened, was the virtual playing field of Azeroth—the magic circle—and the “bodies” that acted and emoted during their time together were a lanky female troll who wore various robes and a Hollywood-perfect Blood Elf in shiny armor. They were a hunter and a paladin. And while some of their issues are quite “in real life,”—issues of power, issues of respect, and issues surrounding their desire to achieve goals—those issues came to bear within a game set, in virtual space. The stakes were still real in their effect, but they were part of a different narrative than had the two been co-workers in a physical space.

In some ways, I am sure this seems like a string of relatively obvious statements I am offering: that identity matters, that the personalities and roles of players matter, that the investment of the player in a toon matters, etc. The complexity can only be seen when stringing it all together into a cohesive whole and looking at what is actually happening. Here, I harken back to where the chapter starts to recall that gaming happens in a “magic circle” of game space: *WoW* is a place, at least in the sense that people inhabit a “body” (a toon) there and convene there for collaborative activities. That space is always already co-authored, as the software and its coders, housed on literal computer servers in various buildings around the world, accessible through the network, sustain the server and world. But that world is shaped by the players, and more importantly one player attempting to do much of anything within that space will require, as part of the process, other players. In many ways, this mirrors IRL social interaction, as any person who goes anywhere will realize that it is practically impossible to do anything involving society alone and that in the places where one can do things alone it is because the energy/roles/agency of another has been captured by a technology, like a “U-Scan”

cash register system or vending machine removing a server/checker from a transaction.

What is far more interesting, however, is what the presence of digital technology means in this scenario. Theorists have plenty of experience with social interaction between people in physical space, and likewise HCI studies have done numerous studies of how humans interact with various digital technologies. What gaming studies—and my study in particular—offers as the extension is what I hope to see more people doing as they study online technologies: now it isn't just studying how the people interact with other people or with machines, it's looking at how the people shape themselves before and during interactions using the technologies. The seemingly simple statement that it wasn't the person who plays as Lint disagreeing with the person who plays as Sally isn't nearly as simple as it looks because it was Lint disagreeing with Sally, but that disagreement, as I pointed out in the narration of their interaction above, was about roles and digital identities, about how they'd shaped themselves into the technologies and adopted stances in the game world. That is the critical next step for understanding interactions in online space: accounting for the online space without letting the online space consume/supersede the identities of the individuals. To put that one last way, at the risk of pulling too hard on something that is both simple and intricate, I will simply say this: the gentleman who plays Lint is not Lint, but he is Lint, and Lint is not simply the 3-D model I ran around Azeroth killing dragons alongside. Understanding exactly what Lint is—a conglomeration of a real person's individual identity, that same person's crafted identity, and the social roles and identity markers invested into him by the others he collaborates with, what comes into vision is the sort of multi-faceted, robust entity that truly collaborates and inhabits digital space. As researchers in gaming studies, we need to spend more time meeting and knowing Lints and less time looking at the parts that make up a Lint. We need to understand the story that Lint tells, the web woven by those fragments.

Earlier in this chapter, I drew heavily from Gee, pointing to his consideration of his game-playing identity while playing the game *Arcanum* (is he *James Paul Gee* as Bead-Bead, James Paul Gee as *Bead-Bead*, or James Paul Gee *as* Bead-Bead). It is in part Gee's contemplation that drives me toward my next assertion. In the end, Gee seems most happy with referring to his identity while playing *Arcanum* as "James Paul Gee *as* Bead-Bead," placing the focus on the action of playing, a similar argu-

ment to the one I've made above. This is precisely the correct position to assume given Gee's experience: the game is about the play, so the identity is about that play as well. In the next chapter, I will take this assertion a step further by including Gee's idea of the "affinity space" and drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau to look at how raid groups form a communal, group digital identity. Because just as much as I urge researchers to go out and meet more Lints, it's even more critical to understand what ten Lints do when they come together.

## 4 “Don’t Be a Double Dotting Douche:” Group Identity in *World of Warcraft*

*Today we find ourselves in a room with a massive creature named Cho’Gall. He lumbers back and forth, slamming a huge mace the size of my toon into our tanks and summoning to his side odd reptilian creatures that periodically emit pulses of dark energy if they aren’t interrupted. I’m chasing one of these reptilian “adds” as the tank, a Druid in his bear form, drags the creature away from everyone else to minimize its damage and insure that the small drops of dark blood that come from its corpse cannot reach Cho’Gall.*

*Normally, the tank would backpedal so that I can keep up, but for some reason today he’s chosen to run facing the wall, full speed. I’m losing ground and losing it fast, so I have tunnel vision to catch up; I don’t take the time to glance over at the group as we rocket past. I can only hear the account of what is happening behind me, and it comes out as a muddled mess of seven voices, most cursing, all louder than their usual. I literally hear (in multiple voices):*

*. . . Where the fuck INTERRUPT ME, I’M CHAN shit, he’s GET BACK IN THE FUCKING GROUP I have to kite out of the DID YOU JUST EAT A SHADOW CRASH? my fuck NOOB Moving backward is not an efficient way to \*a bird squawks behind someone, drowning out that voice\* . . .*

*I hit the reptilian. It doesn’t emit dark energy. I’m right where I should be. We stop moving. While the cacophony behind me continues, I quickly slay the creature and return to the group. As I’m running back, I see the problem—the once neatly organized group of seven, and their huddled formation, has turned into two people standing where the group once was positioned and five people running around haphazardly from place to place.*

*The voice that had previously just been saying “Interrupt, Phill! Interrupt!” chimes in. It’s the bear tank. “It’s not like this fucking matters. You’re all fucking bads who can’t do the DPS to kill this anyway!”*

*The bear tank vanishes. I glance to the raid frame, where everyone’s health is displayed in the corner of the screen. Below his name it says “offline.”*

*I look up at Cho’Gall, tap my “taunt” button to take aggro, and quickly cycle my defensive cooldowns. I’m roughly the size of Cho’Gall’s big toe, and I’m clearly going to die, but I’m going down swinging.*

Up to this point I’ve argued that digital identities in game spaces are narratives, or stories, and that those stories depend on the agency of the player/toon and the willing help of those around that toon. The focal point for this chapter, then, is how a raid group forms a group identity. I’ll utilize the moment where Flashpoint started to see problems, which was also the moment that the group took on its specific sense of collective identity, to illustrate what happens when, to borrow again from Nakamura’s metaphor, a few identity tourists lose their luggage, run out of traveler’s checks, and decide to go back home. In the process, I illustrate how groups take on identities in digital space.

The argument I put forth here, in retrospect, may have been something I knew the second I began this project, but it is, like so many things in research, an obvious, and critical, point that revealed its essential nature to me slowly through the consideration of my research and my data. I pose a simple assertion: raid groups take on a socially constructed collaborative group identity. This bears similarity to the way that members of a team come to think of themselves not as “someone who plays for the Ravens” but “a Raven,” or how people who live in a particular place might come to refer to themselves not as “people who happen to live in Michigan” but “Michiganders.” It extends deeper, however, because the same factors that weigh so heavily into the consideration of a digital identity in the individual sense shape the collaborative group’s identity. Just as I marveled at what constructed Sasha, I sometimes wondered how Flashpoint was the thing that it was.

The group identity formation dynamic can be detailed in the practices of Flashpoint as a raiding group, focusing on moments of discord: when members left, when tensions ran high, and when anger bubbled over, and also moments when there were no hard feelings but members simply didn’t “fit.” My assertion that Flashpoint has a group digital identity hinges on three key factors: (a) the belief that shared goals and shared desires with a shared understanding of roles leads to a collabora-

tive story (building from the last chapter); (b) the understanding that a guild is a community, even if the space where it communes is a practiced virtual realm and not a truly “physical” space; and (c) that once a group identity forms, it becomes a sort of “hyperreal” in the Baudrillardian sense, and as such it holds its own truths, values that are held and policed as a function of the existence of the group, that either pull in and welcome people or expel and repel people based solely on whether or not those people are “one of us,” but not in a way that is sinister, but rather simply because the Flashpoint narrative either is or isn’t what a member is or is not. I will begin here, then, by fleshing out some of these ideas to better illustrate what I mean by “community” and how precisely I conceive of the raid group as a cohesive whole that is also a “simulation” or, to utilize Benedict Anderson, a scholar I begin this discussion with, an “imagined” community.

Group identity here becomes entangled with another somewhat-sticky term: *community*. And the critical first step to understanding how a raid group like Flashpoint’s takes on a collective group identity is to understand the group as a community. Community, though, is a contested word, utilized to describe both classrooms and nations, both circles-of-friends and inhabitants of planets. Before community can be usefully applied, it needs to be properly constrained.

### COMMUNITY: COMMUNAL, LOCAL, AND PRACTICED

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson builds a theory of nationalism that utilizes the idea that a nation is not a “real” community but rather, as the title would indicate, an “imagined” one. He defined a nation, and in the process community, as such:

it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign . . . it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion . . . imagined as limited because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in

certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet . . . it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (2006, pp. 5–7)

While I realize starting with a theory of nationhood might seem curious here, the very real comparisons one might make between the users in an enormous digital social network (like a game) and a nation are substantial (a shared sense of sameness, the fact that people accept that there is a community when they cannot physically see each other, etc.). As such, several of Anderson's distinctions here serve as powerful tools to begin shaping a community heuristic. Communities—even the imagined communities of Anderson's nation—have limits. When Anderson speaks of this larger construct, the nation, he specifies that it *must* be imaginary, in that people have to grant as “real” something that cannot be real to them, at least in an empirical sense, but the nation is made real by the shared understanding of boundaries and a concept—however elastic or abstract—of sameness.

I am, of course, less concerned with the imaginary written large community of a nation, at least in the context of this particular study, other than the obvious comparison between a “nation” in Anderson's conception and the idea that the eleven-and-a-half million players of *WoW* are a “community.” What is instead important to me is what Anderson believes is “imagined” to exist across that large sample, wherein he explains what is truly, in his estimation, a community: “deep, horizontal comradeship,” “fraternity [sic],” and “[a] willing[ness] to die for,” something that is “limited” with “finite, if elastic, boundaries” (2006, p. 6). Borrowing from Anderson's nation-as-community, then, I make the following claims about a digital community: (a) a “real,” practiced, and lived community cannot be bigger than the participants can see/know (to be larger would be to become imaginary in impact); (b) a community is based on a sense of shared experience; and (c) community must have boundaries, though those might be highly elastic and will most certainly change over time.

To contrast Anderson's “nation” in a more game-centric way, in “Affinity spaces: From *Age of Mythology* to today's schools,” Gee suggested

that games take place in something he labeled an “affinity space:” “if we start by talking about spaces, rather than ‘communities,’ we can then go on and ask to what extent the people interacting within a space, or some subgroup of them, do or do not actually form a community” (2007, p. 89). Gee, then, wished to look at shared activities in games as happening in units of “space,” without the idea of membership in a group or belonging to a community being critical to game activity. Gee begs an interesting question: how does one go about determining what is an on-line community and who is part of that community once it exists? Gee pushes against the idea that an imagined community of gamers exists, casting the shared inhabitation of game space as being potentially, at least in some cases, happenstance.

In one sense, I agree completely with Gee. Azeroth stated large, the “world” of *Warcraft*, is not a community any more than one could call the total of Facebook users, all the members of Match.com, or everyone on a mailing list like the They Might Be Giants fans listserv a community. The definition of “affinity space,” or as Gee says in the quote above “people interacting in a space” who share some common thread, be that playing *WoW*, liking Facebook, seeking to date someone, or liking a specific band, seems much more fitting. These groupings/collectives would have to be defined as “imagined” communities, and the idea that the members of these groups feel any real connections to a greater whole would be based on belief in a whole and not on actual interactions with everyone in the group. Those affinity group members don’t know and see everyone else in the affinity group.

In fact, “affinity space” is an accurate way to describe even the individual cities on a particular *WoW* server. There is nothing to inherently unify the people who happen to be in Orgrimmar, the capital city for the Orc race, other than the fact that they all happen to be playing the game and are in that particular space. One need not proclaim any sort of “Orcness” to enter the city, and there is a whole slew of things a person might do—visiting a profession trainer to “level up” a skill, buying or selling goods, arranging travel to another location—that involve only NPCs. It would be difficult to claim that Orgrimmar, even on one of the smallest servers where the population of Horde players might only be in the thousands, is a community.

I assert that in game-spaces, community is a practiced composed story, the thing being told: community is composed of shared story beats, desires, and styles of play, including elements of friendship as well

as issues of communal “need,” something I will touch on a bit later in this chapter. In this sense, a guild is, essentially, a community, or to invoke the Indigenous term now loaded with additional meanings that complicate its use, a guild is *tribal*. A raid group is the same. Due to the differences in how geographical/physical space must be considered in virtual worlds, I will not say that the participants replace the “space” entirely, but rather that the participants in a gaming community create and maintain the space, as guilds and raid groups are the result of kairotic actions and sustaining practices; the time/space—narrative—must be right for the community to exist, but beyond that moment, the community’s continued existence depends upon the practices of its members.

### CITIES THAT ARE(N’T) COMMUNITIES OR TRUTHS, FICCTIONS AND A FICTIONAL TRUTH

In considering how this sense of practice relates to building community, I turn to “Walking in the City,” where Michel de Certeau wrote:

New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. (1993, p. 157)

Here, de Certeau builds a concept of *city* that is based on a contemporaneous sense of use and practice. A few pages later he elaborates the three things that “construct” this city:

The “city” founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation. First, the production of its own space (*un espace propre*): rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it; Second, the substitution of a nowhen, or of a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions; univocal scientific strategies, made possible by the flattening out of all the data in a plane projection, must replace the tactics of users who take advantage of ‘opportunities’ and who, through these

trap-events, these lapses in visibility, reproduce the opacities of history everywhere;

Third and finally, the creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, Hobbes's State, all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects—groups, associations, or individuals. (1993, p. 159)

So, within de Certeau's system, a city (a space with an active community) is based on the production of its own space, though that space could be imaginary, as it is self-defined, the production of a synchronic system (having a history and a contemporary moment—existence in time/space), and it needs to have a "thingness" that creates a "groupness." I know that de Certeau is speaking of a geographical place—of a physical city that consists of streets and buildings and land and has people that live within it, but conceptually, what he is describing is actually a system that builds itself, a practiced network, a story. I believe this is what successful *WoW* groups do. They construct themselves through repeated and modified actions within a constrained space. There is no physical realm for the group, therefore there is no literal, concrete-brick-and-mortar city, but their practices transform the obvious fiction of Azeroth, its bits and pixels, into something real.

What I suggest here, then, is that a raiding group exists as a community in the same way that the city does in de Certeau's essay. New York—de Certeau's example—exists because people inhabit and practice it. It exists through use. A raid group, and a guild, within a game, likewise exist only through use; their simple presence in the game world doesn't make them, or the space, a community. If a goblin Death Knight falls in the Swamp of Sorrows and no one is there to listen, he doesn't make a sound because I play with *WoW*'s sound turned off. But if Salty is there fishing next to him, it's a total "roflcopter" that I fell, and believe me, everyone in the community will be told.

This sense that community-and-guild-exists-as-practice is typified by Flashpoint. The guild is unique in that every group is unique, a collection of real individuals with real goals. But it's also shockingly similar to a great number of just-under-the-top-tier raiding guilds in the ways that it operates—raiding at set times, participating in the same encounters in the same order, utilizing many of the same strategies—and in that it has the same basic mix of toon classes and skills. There are roles that each

person plays. There are goals that are shared by a host of other groups. There is a mentality that is shared. It is the melding of that which makes Flashpoint unique and that which makes it similar to so many other guilds that ultimately leads to success. Everyone in Flashpoint knows and understands what the guild is about and what the guild wants, and their communal practices lead to guild success.

### **RAGING BEARS, DOUBLE-DOTTING DOUCHES AND A NEW COUPLE**

Flashpoint started as a model of success. During their first raid week—which I discussed in chapter 2—they went eleven-of-twelve of the first tier of *Cataclysm* raid content, only failing to complete the last boss because there wasn't enough time in their compressed raid schedule. With the core members having just left TheSkullz, the group meshed well and functioned as a cohesive collective. While spirits were high, Lint told the group, repeatedly, not to expect the same success every single week.

He would end up being prophetic. That first week, Flashpoint had to pick up—or PUG—two people who were highly talented friends of the eight core members. When the guild found regulars to fill those last two spots the next week, the overall group damage done, and the ability to kill things, went down. It didn't seem significant, at first, but when Flashpoint next pulled Cho'Gall, the final boss of Bastion of Twilight (the eleventh boss), this damage problem reared its ugly head. The week before the DPS players had been so stellar that the adds—the other mobs that Cho'Gall summons to essentially distract players and debuff their abilities—were no problem. They died quickly and quietly.

With two new people, those same adds died slowly and in some cases not at all. The strategy that called for eight people in a tight group with one tank that kited an add and a DPS who followed that tank to kill the add before returning to the tight group—the method of killing the boss that the group had learned and practiced before—turned into a tank standing where he should, a tank kiting, a DPS following the kiting tank, and six people milling around in some sort of odd gyrating cloud around Iceman. As a result, the guild failed at the encounter fifteen times in two hours and quit for the night. Then they came back two nights later and wiped (the entire team died) twenty-three times in a little over three hours, then quit. Then they tried it the next week and wiped ten times in a little over an hour and quit, and then they tried

two days after that . . . I think the pattern is coming clear. Cho'Gall wouldn't die again. He had Flashpoint's number. For a month, Cho'Gall stood in the way of the guild, even after they managed to kill Nefarian, the last boss of the tier, and move to twelve-of-twelve.

It was after a month of these wipes that the evening from my chapter-opening anecdote happened. The bear tank there, who I will refer to here as TheBearTank, was, as Iceman described him to me aptly: "A little fucking ray of sunshine. Really, he's just a douche. Him and the boomkin—that double-dotting douche. They're assholes. But they're good." The Boomkin Iceman refers to here was TheBearTank's best friend, and the two of them had come to Flashpoint to have "another" place to raid and presumably to relax. Flashpoint—though highly successful—billed itself as a casual raiding group, and TheBearTank and his friend didn't share that vibe. These two wanted to push for server rank one.

Though he wasn't a focal participant in my study, I knew TheBearTank well because I was the DPS who always followed him on those Cho'Gall pulls, and as such he and I spent that encounter in constant contact, talking about the fight while he vented his frustrations. We spoke quite frequently during that month of failed attempts. He had a low opinion of everyone in the group but his friend and Iceman, and he never really held that back. He was, I would assert, not interested in being friends with, or collaborating with, the group as a whole.

TheBearTank's reaction, and his leaving, serves as a second example of the role confusion that I pointed out with Sally, but it further shows how the identity of the individual can contradict the identity of the group and compromise the community. Iceman invited TheBearTank and his friend to join Flashpoint under the impression that they were going to just be raiders and take instruction/help out and have fun. They both had all the gear they could possibly want already, knew the fights, and were solid players who weren't apt to make mistakes, so they seemed like "ideal candidates," as Iceman would say, in spite of TheBearTank being "a little high strung." But Iceman thought the two of them weren't there to lead or to innovate. They were there to relax and let Iceman and Lint run the show. That wasn't how TheBearTank and his friend saw themselves. They believed they were the two best players in the group—and maybe they were—but they also felt like if they wanted to do things their way, it was fine. Everyone else should adapt to their innovative leads.

The second problem was TheBearTank's friend "double dotting." This is a practice that elite players—or as Iceman put it, "number

hogs”—use to increase their damage done. When facing multiple targets, in many cases the DPSs are supposed to focus on whatever target the tank is attacking so as to not fragment aggro (a practice called “focused firing”), as the tank can hold multiple targets, but tank aggro is highest on the target being directly attacked by the tank and cascades down to the other mobs in a respective group or “pull.” A double-dotting DPS will place his damage over time attacks—spells cast that do initial damage then damage every X seconds for Y period of time—on the tank’s target and other targets as well, sometimes up to three or four. This often pulls aggro from the tank’s secondary targets, which means the tank has to switch his focus to those mobs to taunt them back, which leaves his initial target—the thing being attacked by everything but the extra dots—without aggro generation and hence in prime position to be pulled away by another DPS exceeding his threat. This can lead to a mess wherein the tank is switching targets and taunting as fast as possible but cannot regain aggro over everything in the pull. Most players don’t double dot when a tank is facing aggro issues, but TheBearTank’s friend was only concerned with doing more damage, so he often double dotted, even knowing that it could lead to catastrophe. Coupled with TheBearTank’s taunt offs, the two of them created a fragmented aggro mess for Flashpoint and impeded their ability to complete encounters. They were basically killing everyone by causing enemies to peel off from the tank and damage the rest of the group.

The night of TheBearTank’s rage-quit during the Cho’Gall encounter—my introduction to this chapter—TheBearTank and his friend not only logged off without saying a word but also quit the guild, and without talking to anyone other than a quick insult to Iceman, transferred to a different server, a practice I clearly sort of understand, having done it myself. Initially, Iceman was distraught, as this meant that not only did the guild lose two regulars but would need a new tank, a role that is often difficult to fill. But Iceman found replacements in the form of a married couple that both played druids, who I will refer to as Tim and Cat. They joined the guild, with Tim taking over for TheBearTank and Cat filling the final roster spot.

The week these two new recruits participated for the first time, Flashpoint beat Cho’Gall in three attempts—all of which were Tim’s first attempts at the encounter. The next week the guild beat their first heroic—or “hard mode”—boss. A week after that Flashpoint defeated a second heroic mode boss, and progression resumed. Tim wasn’t as well

geared as TheBearTank, nor was he as familiar with the fights. And Cat didn't do quite the damage that Double-Dotter did. But when everyone understood their respective roles and worked for the good of the group, success was met with "lesser" statistical power. Everyone was back to telling a singular story.

### WHEN WE ARE LIKE ME AND IS LIKE WE AND WE ALL RAID TOGETHER

In Flashpoint, I believe I've witnessed and documented an example of a group digital identity. Their "reality" was that of a casual raiding guild focusing on getting better and enjoying a mutual story, bearing in mind the desires of each individual but never putting the needs of one or another over the needs of the group. I wish to stress that the same concept applies to a guild—or at least, most certainly, this guild—in earnest. Goals were set and strategies made to meet them, and everyone carried his or her weight. I jokingly once said "from each according to his leetness, to each according to our pwnage" when asking Iceman how he'd characterize the group dynamic, and after pausing, and getting my joke, he said "well, yeah. As long as you don't suck."

A final element that isn't in the foreground but must also be considered is the issue of "need" in the communal practices of a guild/community. When I asked Lint what he felt Flashpoint was, he said this:

[Flashpoint] is a collection of individuals who all play a game and for the most part tolerate one another so they raid, or in other words the part of the game they enjoy and can't do alone. [Flashpoint] grew out of friendships and an inability to enjoy the game the way we all wanted to. Certain people have been around, and in some cases still are, through necessity. By and large however most I would consider are friendly and while everyone may not be "friends," there aren't many people who are around simply because they are required. If I feel someone is getting in the way of everyone enjoying their time, then that's when issues need to be addressed.

What Lint touches on here is a less idyllic view of community, something I believe has been present in the discussion but that so many have spoken around: the concept of *necessity*. Most specifically, communities often "need" specific things, and in most communities, some members

adhere simply because they fulfill a communal need. John Dewey (1954) in *The Public and Its Problems* claimed that it was necessity that caused communities to adhere. So, there will, at times, be people who are in the community out of mutual need (their need for the community and the community's need for their efforts). In a guild, these sorts of people aren't viewed as a problem, but as can be seen from what Lint says, they're not "preferred." In the case of Flashpoint, eventually all of the "of need" members either became a part of the social network of the guild or moved on and were replaced by members who were a better fit, but I believe this is atypical; based on the other raid groups I've seen, and what members of Flashpoint have said about previous experiences, there tend to be people who are there because they are needed and they, in turn, need the rest of the group to be able to raid. In that sense, the luck of the draw, so to speak, led me to an idealized view of how all of these dynamics work.

It is that sense of group identity—that everyone does his or her part, has fun, and that some might be present due to individual and group needs—that contributed to, and was then galvanized by, the events with TheSkullz in the last chapter. But when TheBearTank and his friend didn't want to be a part of the Flashpoint group, and instead chose to try to push for elite status and seek out individual numbers and individual satisfaction, the guild became an uncomfortable reality for them and they, in turn, made everyone else uncomfortable. This is because the common story broke into sets of stories with different plotlines. In many senses, it became about what was sustainable and what wasn't, with the raid member's desires and needs establishing the ad hoc rules of how raid time would be spent. Much in the way that Stuart Selber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1996) noted that message board communities often self-police troublesome users, the guild without any overt action self-policed—or rather self-expelled—those two members, with the actions of the collective seeming to bubble around TheBearTank and his friend the way the immune system might attack a foreign body. No one professed to be doing anything to push either of those players out, but the effort to progress eliminated them because their desires were so incongruent with the needs of the group.

I realize that metaphor might seem strained, but bear (no pun intended) with it for a moment. As a part of my research I cataloged every raid group interaction between my participants and TheBearTank, as well as a number of discussions during raid preparation and while just

otherwise killing time in game. He was, as I mentioned before, often quite displeased and would say judgmental and less-than-constructive things about other raid members, but looking back, no one from Flashpoint ever said anything negative or judgmental to him or to his friend, at least not in any of the encounters that I witnessed and logged. They were never blamed for the group's failures, even though my data clearly illustrates the aggro problems that Iceman and Lint knew existed, and a participant would have had to have been blind and deaf to not notice the hostility from TheBearTank and Dotter. No one even "barked" back when TheBearTank would refer to someone as "you fucking fail ass noob" or "you waste-of-fifteen-dollars-piece-of-shit." He was always treated with the respect raiders give to their tank, was never asked to sit on "the bench" so someone else could participate, was never denied any item that dropped, and was never otherwise treated poorly, presumably because he was Iceman's choice to tank and the group had faith that Iceman was maintaining the narrative (my research clearly indicates the latter, though the former was sadly something I never asked directly and must infer from comments like "Ice said he's alright" or "Ice got him to help us"). If anything, the group seemed to make an effort to make the duo feel better, with me at one point finding myself to be the one who was most at-odds with TheBearTank due to me being his partner during the Cho'Gall encounter and not appreciating his constant degradation. I did once tell him to shut up, quite loudly, in what is the only time in my year of research logs and recordings where I raise my voice.

Still, the result was that he "went nuclear" as Iceman would say, logged off in a huff, and vanished. The same thing happened with other members during my time following the group: there was the hunter who could only make it to one hour of each raid but was still invited promptly and awarded more loot than others to try to keep her "on par, gear wise" with people who raided the full time each night—she stayed for two months then decided that it "sucked"; There was the warlock who spent two hours every raid night talking about how he'd do something the group did the same way every week differently/better, was given the chance every week, and finally, after failing at it for a fourth time, in spite of the group's complete patience with him, rage quit; there was the warrior who desperately wanted new weapons, who the guild got new weapons for, who then blamed his not being "used" to the new weapons for his performance and never logged in again; there was the priest who said over and over "please tell me if I do something wrong," who then

told me one night, seemingly crying, that he couldn't take being "called out for doing that wrong" and left the group; and finally there was the guy who claimed his other guild, which we found out later didn't exist, was so much better that running with Flashpoint was "below him," but who showed up every week right on time and ran the full session until he finally came up against a fight he couldn't master then left to go back to his "elite" fictional other guild. I was positive, as I looked back at my data, that my memory must be somehow flawed from my own participation, and that I must have missed the points where the group alienated these members. But those moments simply do not exist. Or if they did exist, they were in hidden private discussion that the other members refused to share with me, something that I cannot scientifically rule out but am confident didn't happen due to the level of openness the group had with me by the end of the research. Most of them forgot that I was there to do work; I was just the goblin who tanked and killed stuff.

What does exist, in each case, is the discussion of why each of those people didn't fit, discussions that are matter-of-fact and don't pass any more judgment than I did in my descriptions of those participants above. I feel almost as if I'm valorizing Flashpoint in saying this, but there just isn't any evidence of anger toward these players: not during their time with the group, not about the ways that they left, and not afterward. But there is a direct acknowledgment that each of these players did not fit, and often Iceman, at least, showed surprise at how long some of them lasted.

This leads me to reiterate an assertion I made a few paragraphs ago: Flashpoint had (has) a group digital identity. Some players, even when welcomed and treated well, made fully aware of the group's goals and allowed to see how everyone behaved, couldn't fit into that identity due to their desire for other things or to behave in other ways. I wouldn't argue that Flashpoint's identity is fixed; I can chart ways in which it changed, and I will discuss those at length in the next chapter, but its identity had (has) agency and a certain core portion of it—the part that emerged from theSkullz and bloomed into its own "thing"—held together through practices composing of their story. If it's Tuesday and it's 10:50 pm server time, Salty's cooking up fish, there's a tiny DK preparing to cast a teleport spell, and Iceman is trying to corral the ten people who will be starting the raid into a single channel on the Ventrilo server. Lint and the new bear tank are both tucking in children and will come back, each with coffee, with some interesting anecdote about the last

thing a son or daughter said before daddy headed to raid. Leah is picking one of many reasons to remind our resident Role-Player that he's a total nerd, and the member of the guild who was relocated to Germany is sharing accounts of a morning news broadcast in a language he doesn't speak while eating Cheerios. In ten minutes, those people will be of a single mind, rolling along, going encounter by encounter through a raid instance. And that's the way it is. That's what Flashpoint was, the story it told. It's the interesting blob made by coffee, awkward role-play, jovial horseplay, Charlie-Brown's-Teacher-voiced news, digital fish fries, kids saying the darndest things, the frenetic chaos of organizing, and the calm, relaxed execution of yet another week of well-practiced, well mimicked digital dragonslaughter.

### **BUT WAIT . . . WHAT ABOUT THAT BEAR AND THE DOTS?**

Based on my research, I would argue that there's a bit of a black box to the whole "not really meant for Flashpoint" self-policing phenomenon, but I also know that making such a claim could appear to not illustrate proper scrutiny of the what actually happened. Allow me to cast things another way.

Maybe, to borrow from the classic relationship cliché, it's not Flashpoint, it's "you." TheBearTank and his pal the Double-Dotter needed to be the best of the best in their group; they needed success with little effort; and they needed, as judgmental as it sounds, to, as Iceman said, "have their asses kissed all the damn time." Neither of them would deny this to be true, and they both, in fact, were quite forceful about the "we're the best" part of it. Perhaps they weren't interested in being in a casual group where the raid might all go kill something that it is only killing because one member of the group wants the dragon mount that might drop from it and the other nine think that's a great idea for the night. It's entirely possible that they weren't willing to accept that the guild might all die on a boss encounter because Lint's son woke up from a nightmare and he had to step away from the computer. Their desires didn't fit that narrative. So, they had to move on and find what they were after.

Other than the snippets of hateful dialogue during Cho'Gall pulls, I never really got TheBearTank's side of the story. After my research had basically concluded, though, he came looking for me, a moment that as a researcher I found fascinating but as a player, knowing his low opinion of me, I was slightly terrified by. It turned out he had spoken at length

with Iceman, and there were a number of issues he was facing—issues I don't feel comfortable sharing, other than to say I completely and totally understand how a person could have serious outside-of-game problems that would overpower their gaming lives. Iceman mentioned that a number of Flashpoint's raiders hadn't understood why TheBearTank stormed off, so he—in all his BearTankness—wanted to come and give me what I thought was an apology but Iceman felt didn't really make up for TheBearTank's behavior. One thing he shared, though, helps to put my data in perspective. He said, “look, I know you guys kill shit, and you're kicking some serious ass over there, but I have no fucking idea how. I don't get what it is you're [here I am quite certain he means the whole guild] doing. I mean I watch you [here I think he meant me specifically] and I just think there's no way, then you're at the top of the DPS and the thing is dead. It never made sense to me.”

TheBearTank, in the end, didn't understand the Flashpoint story. This is where I think what I said to Iceman surprised him. I told him I completely understood, and even though TheBearTank had, at one point, rather savagely verbally attacked me, and said worse still about me to Iceman, I harbored no ill will towards him. TheBearTank didn't “get” Flashpoint. And perhaps I only feel like I do because I spent so much time watching them (watching us?) and paying such close attention to their (to our?) interactions, but in that moment, talking to Iceman, I could see how a failure to grasp how the guild operated would lead to intense frustration and ultimately alienation. Not everyone would be easy going about either or both tanks having to run to deal with their kids and leaving the group to die. Not everyone could be happy with doing hours of work just to fulfill one group member's desire, such as running old content to get a cape one player wanted for cosmetic reasons. So, I told TheBearTank it was okay, and we never spoke again.

### CONCLUSION: WE ARE . . .

In concluding this chapter, I wanted to be able to assert with certainty that I'd established that there is such a thing as group digital identity. In this case, as this raid group was observed, it appeared to form a community with an identity that told a story—three things I firmly believe are intertwined. This is, of course, but one case, and therein lies the problem with making any dramatic assertions. What one raid group does might not be what another does. In honesty, I know that the group that

I worked with was oddly harmonious. I know from other raiding experiences that other groups didn't work this well together. I can't pretend I don't know that, just as I can't distort the narrative of what I did witness.

What I can safely reiterate is that Flashpoint does have a digital group identity—a sense of community and a shared narrative—based on precisely the things I enumerate earlier in this chapter. I asserted, based on the work of Benedict Anderson (2006), that a community, and hence a cohesive raid group with a group identity, must (a) not be bigger than the participants can see and experience and (b) must be based on a sense of fellowship or shared experience. I finished my construction of a community by utilizing the three ideas from de Certeau's "Walking in the City": (a) that a community is based on the production of its own space, (b) the production of a synchronic system (having a history and existence in time/space), and (c) that it needs to have a "thingness" to generate "groupness." Taken as a whole, then, a raiding game community, and hence a raid group digital identity, depends on the following five criteria:

1. *Finite membership*—everyone needs to know everyone, at least to some degree. This does not indicate that there must be, for example, fourteen equal "friendships" or "relationships" in a raid group of fourteen, but each member needs to know of, have worked with, and have seen the other thirteen members.
2. *There must be a sense of shared experience*, one that might border on being labeled a "culture"—consisting of jargon, traditions, styles, attitudes, and shared history
3. *It needs to generate and maintain its own story*, a story maintained by practices, a living document.
4. *It needs to be the product of activities in a moment in time as well*. These communities and identities are contingent upon a kairotic moment—there was a time and a place for the specific group to flash (slight pun intended) into existence.
5. *There needs to be a "thingness" or "groupness"*—in other words, for there to be a group digital identity, the group has to have a sense of itself as existing and creating a story/history. I realize that might seem, upon first reading, paradoxical; a thing can only exist if it thinks of itself as a thing—I realize I sound a bit like Descartes playfully proclaiming that "I think, therefore I

am,” but it’s the important step from people in one of Gee’s affinity spaces to a group with group identity. If I, for example, just happen to be standing next to someone at McDonald’s when we both order food, we are not having dinner communally; we are not a dinner party. But if I meet someone at McDonalds and we order together, sit together, and dine together, we had for that time/space moment a dinner meeting and were dining as a party. Just doing the same thing in the same space isn’t enough to be a group or a community. It lacks a group motive.

Utilizing these five criteria as a heuristic, it’s easy to see the differences for the members of the Flashpoint raid group while inside TheSkullz guild, once they broke out with TheBearTank and Dotter and after that duo left and the group became consistent. Point one might have been true even for TheSkullz, though the amount of distrust among members might have led to deception and a sense of not really knowing the others well. There certainly wasn’t a sense of groupness fostered in TheSkullz, or in the total of the Flashpoint group with TheBearTank. Each did begin by adhering to point three, but I am willing to grant that *WoW*, in this context, does a great deal to foster this point by literally generating a space with goals and dropping a raid group into it; it is when people do not engage in practicing the actions of raiding that this point falls apart. Point four builds on this with timing, something that certainly was disadvantageous for TheSkullz and for TheBearTank and his friend. Finally comes the sort of culmination of the whole thought process: is there a “groupness?” There was for Flashpoint, but there was not for TheSkullz, and the result was one group with an identity and another with a murky mess of presumed identities that were overpowered by the identities of its participating members.

In the next chapter, I look at the well-oiled machine and just how many points have to be lubricated to prevent the ten members of Flashpoint from being eaten by a gigantic lava maggot. It’s an interesting story.

## 5 Dances with Fire Maggots: When It's All Good

*I am standing in front of a massive wind god named Al'Akir. He has just used his power to blow me backward on the platform that holds me and my fellow combatants, and as I rush to return to my spot, close enough to unleash melee attacks on the god, our raid leader calls out to me over Ventrilo.*

*"Phill, there's a line of tornados coming at you. Move fast!"*

*"I see them . . . kind of," I say, as I spin to face the squall line. Then I'm picked up by one of the twisters, thrown from the platform, and sent floating out into the sky to die while all the while, still staring back up at the hulking wind god.*

*"What the fuck? I told you the tornado was coming!" Iceman says, nicely in spite of how it reads in text.*

*"I know, I know. I just couldn't get turned in time. Once I saw them, it was too late."*

*"Shit, did you keyboard turn?"*

*"You mean with my arrow keys? Yeah."*

*"You have to mouse turn there. Keyboard is too slow."*

*Iceman curses about something else, and over Ventrilo I can hear his keystrokes like the hooves of a charging horse.*

*"No problem. I'll show you before the next pull."*

*Eventually the group wiped, Iceman gave me a thirty second tutorial on turning with my mouse, and never again—well, not never again, but far, far less often—did the squall line make short work of me.*

*And so I learned.*

Having established the primacy of digital and group digital identities, I now want to return to my assertion of how game execution is highly narrative. I offer in this and the next chapter two case studies. The first is an encounter that went exactly as a well-attuned raiding group should,

a fight with a gigantic worm called Magmaw. In Chapter six, the second case study shows what happened when failure comes to town and the gamers have to get a little bit more clever, as the group attempts to defeat a phoenix named Alysrazor.

I wish to open here with an assertion: gamers have a sophisticated collaborative method of executing repeated points in a shared narrative that they enact nearly constantly while playing. What is particularly interesting, however—as the data here will exhibit as I move through a rather complex example—is how the combination of understanding and enacting that these narratives leads to moments of innovative agency by individual gamers that result not only in group success but ultimately causes the team to become more “teamlke” by cementing the collaborative way that a group tells this chunk of their story.

### THE FLASHPOINT FOR . . . FLASHPOINT

Flashpoint, a “casual” raiding guild, conducted its first run into the *WoW Cataclysm* raid content during the last week of February in 2011. The guild is actually “just” a ten person raiding group “with some bench players and a few social friends who don’t raid,” according to their founder, Lint. Flashpoint came together when Lint and his friend Iceman were confronted with what the two considered “serious” social/interpersonal problems with their previous guild, TheSkullz. The dispute between the members of that guild was a central part of chapter three. These are the parts of the story you know already.

The first encounter in the *Cataclysm* raid progression—in other words the starting point to the twelve-boss set of encounters—is a boss called Magmaw in the dungeon Blackwing Descent. This would be Flashpoint’s, well, flashpoint. The Magmaw encounter is a perfect example of how collaboration—and some slight innovation—make for a successful group narrative. The encounter, at its essence, is simple—a memetic concert of four coordinated movements (with each player executing specific tasks) that repeats until the boss or the raid group is dead. The raid group, ten members—three healers, one tank, and six DPS—must kill a gigantic lava worm named Magmaw while avoiding his attacks, spews of lava, and small groups of lava parasites that emerge from the spew. So, from the standpoint of a gaming story, the heroes charge in, engage the giant worm, and as Iceman says each week, “pew-pew, don’t stand in shit, get loot, then kill the next thing.”

But as scholars like Jesper Juul (2005) have pointed out numerous times, gaming situations are almost never “just” about a story. The Magmaw encounter, then, is a situation where there are players and a goal; there are rules, but most importantly, there are mechanics—the actions of the game—and practices—actions by toons—that must be understood, enacted, and replicated numerous times to have success. In other words, as I suggested in my introduction, the encounter is a written story, and success or failure is primarily based on the ability of the gamers to do three things: (a) to understand and recognize the repetitive nature of the mechanics, (b) to execute the practices required for their specific role, and (c) to recognize what the other nine players are doing and react when someone—or more than one someone—botches the narrative.

Magmaw stands along one of the long edges of a rectangular room that is empty other than two broken pillars near the back and an advantageously placed stone spike that just happens to be directly in front of the worm. The area where Magmaw actually stands is a hole broken away from the floor and a sidewall, and well below the worm’s head (I’ve never tried to measure, as it would require falling to my virtual death), about eighty in-game feet below, is a lava pit. The players enter the area via one of two parallel staircases to the south, and while entering the room, from the dungeon’s door at the base of the steps, they must battle three “trash mobs,” or, to put that in less gamecentric terms, three less powerful enemies that are, as is reflected in what gamers call them, more of an annoyance and chance for random loot drops than any real challenge. Once those mobs are defeated, the group can engage Magmaw. Below, see Figure 1: a screenshot of Magmaw’s chamber before the battle begins and Figure 2, a screenshot of the group mid-encounter.

The encounter follows a series of relatively simple steps that must be strung together correctly by each member of the group for the encounter to work correctly. This is true any time a group encounters Magmaw. It is the narrative of the fight, an encounter that has no random elements (something Iceman points out frequently to the raid group—“we control everything here”). There are, essentially, five roles: (a) the tank (this is one of the few single tank fights in the first tier of the ten-person *Cataclysm* content), (b) the melee DPS who must attack the worm and utilize the spike, (c) the ranged DPS who must attack the worm and kill the lava parasite “adds,” (d) the raid healers who must insure that everyone but the tank stays alive, and (e) the tank healer who must keep the tank from dying.



Figure 1. Magmaw and his chamber. © 2010 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved.

In Flashpoint's raids, Lint is the tank for this encounter ninety percent of the time, including the first night, the specific instance I am describing here. His role is, as he says, "the easiest to fuck up," but requires, as he is again quick to admit, "less moving and stuff" than many others. When the raid group was ready to begin the encounter, Lint issued a countdown from three over Ventrilo, then he attacked Magmaw, insuring that he stood just to the left of the boss while staying as close as he could without falling into the lava. His only goals were to ensure that no matter what anyone else did, the worm's attention stayed firmly on him and that he did not die, the latter of which being something Lint would remind me was "job number one," as he cycled through his abilities utilizing whatever he could to ensure that his damage intake wasn't so high that his healer couldn't keep up. After two minutes and nine seconds, Magmaw leaned down and bit Lint, then reared up again with Lint in his mouth, mangling him. During this time, Lint took severe damage and could do nothing but count on his healer and make slowed, weakened heals through the nose of the beast. After the worm was pulled onto the spike (see next paragraph) Lint was released, and he then rotated to the right side, waited for the worm rear back up, and began again, though after the first, the bites come every minute. The night of that first run, he was taken up a total of five times. You can see Lint's positioning, as well as everyone else's, in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Raid group engaged with Magmaw. ©2010 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved.

During the encounter, two members of the group—in this case me and another Death Knight—stood in melee range, attacked the worm, and at an appointed time enacted a specific and critical task. As I mentioned above, there is a spike just in front of Magmaw. These two DPSs stand in position near the spike, attacking the boss and avoiding attacks whenever possible. When Magmaw bites the tank and lifts him into the air, the worm slumps forward. At this point, the spike is clickable, and if the two melee DPSs click, they can leap onto the spike and from the spike they can leap onto Magmaw’s head where, conveniently, there are spears with chains from previous battles. Once on the head, the two DPSs can throw the chains down onto the spike, using them to pull and slam Magmaw’s head into the ground, impaling the worm on the spike for a short time. This causes Magmaw to drop the tank, and for thirty seconds Magmaw is stunned and receives double damage. During this phase of the encounter, the melee DPSs drop off of Magmaw’s head and begin attacking again, rotating then to stand by the spike on the side opposite the tank when Magmaw rears up again. This is repeated as many times as the tank is bitten. On this particular night, myself and the other Death Knight repeated the jump/spear toss portion of the battle five times, each coming just after Lint was bitten and lifted up.

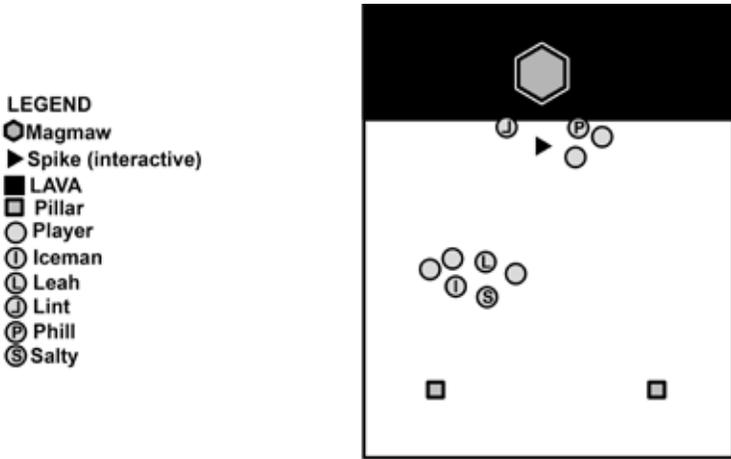


Figure 3. Initial Magmaw positioning.

The ranged DPSs, who can attack from a distance, cluster with two of the healers off to the side behind the tank at the start of the fight. That particular night, as with every run, Flashpoint chose to group up to the left first, but this could easily be reversed, as long as the practice of moving from one side to the other is replicated, as the location of the lava pillar is dictated by the position of the players. Of my participants, healers Leah and Salty were part of this group on the night of the first Flashpoint raid, along with Iceman, who DPSed as a mage and also raided led, a pair of hunters, and a warlock. Their job was to attack Magmaw and move out of the way of lava spews, going from left to right, then right to left, then left to right, etc., as Magmaw casted an ability called “lava pillar,” an attack that is aimed at one specific ranged player—one of the people in that group—and insures that if they move in unison just after the cast, everyone is safe from the attack. The ranged DPSs then attacked the lava parasites, the little worm adds I mentioned earlier, which emerged from the impact point of the lava pillar. Once those parasites were dead, the DPSs returned to attacking Magmaw until it was time to repeat their movement. This moment often overlapped with the tank and melee DPSs moving (four of the five times), but they also happen more often (an additional eight times in the encounter, for a total of twelve moves right and then back left), so the ranged DPS and healers were often moving from left to right to right to left throughout the encounter, avoiding lava and killing parasites, or in the case of the healers, healing.

The last role in the fight is that of the tank healer, who in this encounter was a druid. His job was to keep Lint—and himself—alive, rotating positions with the melee DPSs to avoid attacks. His role required little physical movement but was, as Salty told me from times when he had to do it, “extremely intense” because of the profound amount of damage Lint took while inside Magmaw’s jaw.

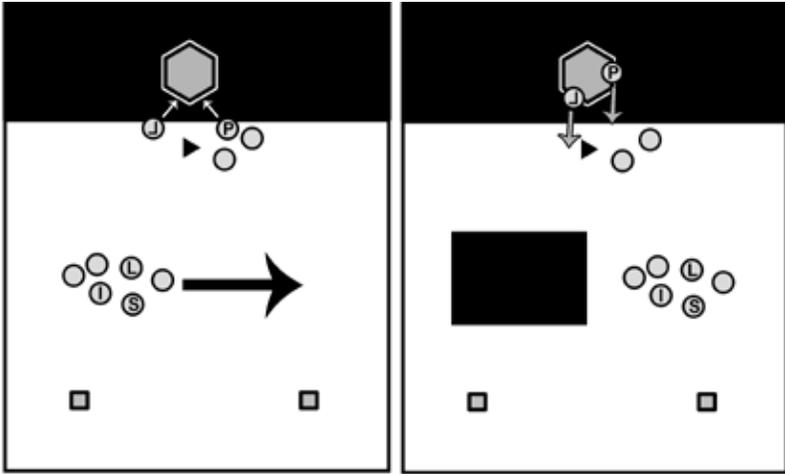


Figure 4. Magmaw Encounter Movements.

Those are the roles, practices and mechanics of the Magmaw encounter. I have explained them as I observed them happening that first night, trying to balance description with clarity and to stay true to the game without going jargon crazy. But this is how Iceman explains it each week, a narrative so familiar that I can almost lip-sync him (as this is the start of each raid, I heard him say this every Tuesday at about midnight for four months):

Okay, Lint, you know what you’re doing. Don’t lose aggro. Don’t fall in the lava. Don’t die. If you’re melee DPS, you want to stand by the spike away from Lint. Don’t stand in the fire crap that comes up, though, and when Magmaw comes down, spam click on the spike until you go up, then spam one until you get a target, click, and be ready to start pew-pewing when you land. Tank healer, stand up by Phill, and if you see your threat go up, have him DnD on you. DPS, I’ve put the square on my head. Follow me. We have to dodge the lava pillar. If you

get hit, you fail the retard test and we all die. Once the parasites spawn, AOE them hard until they're dead, then get back on the boss. WATCH YOUR FEET! Don't stand in the lava. It'll kill you. Healers, stay with us. Don't trail behind or the lava pillar will hit you and we all die. Any questions?

This is, of course, game jargon dense, and Iceman says it so often that it comes out in what seems like a single rapid-fire rap verse, no stops to breathe, no pauses to think. There is also an assumption that isn't written into what Iceman said here, in what he says every week: it is assumed that anyone who is in the raid group with Flashpoint has either seen this encounter at least once before or has watched one of the several YouTube tutorial videos and read the description at the guild's website of choice *WoWhead.com*. He expects that these raiders bring a certain level of *WoW* understanding and familiarity with the narrative thrust of the encounter with them to the raid. Iceman has told people before raid to do their specific preparations, and he assumes everyone has, so it hopefully makes sense to the reader that his description is much shorter, much more rehearsed, and much easier to convey quickly than mine above.

This particular encounter was what is referred to as a "one-shot;" the group went in, coordinated, and executed their roles "as close to perfect," as Iceman would say, "as possible," and no one was dead at the end, other than the boss. There were two small hiccups that the group overcame. The first is that Salty, on the second rotation, fell behind the group just enough that he was hit by the lava pillar. This shot him into the air and drained almost all of his life, but he was far enough behind the rest of the group and just barely got hit, so no one else was damaged and he was able to catch his own health up. He was also poisoned by the parasites and actually died about thirty seconds later, but as a shaman, one of his skills is that he can "rebirth," or automatically "pop up," as gamers refer to it, so he was able to do exactly that and run back to the group without any serious problems. There was also a moment where the druid healer pulled aggro from Lint, but I saw this happen and was able to taunt the boss, taking aggro off the healer until Lint could taunt back, and due to my Death Knight's heavy armor, the druid healer was able to keep me alive in spite of taking a nearly fatal hit from Magmaw. Everything else was flawless, well timed, and well-coordinated.

**INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVE: SALTY GETS NIPPED (THIS TIME)**

Allow me now to focus specifically on Salty and that tiny mistake I mentioned at the end of the last section. Salty's job is to move from left to right, then right to left, then left to right, then right to left, etc. as many times as is needed in concert with the other ranged DPSs and healers. This particular night was the first time Flashpoint ran this encounter, but it wasn't Salty's (or anyone in the group's) first time, and I'd been with Salty running the encounter as a member of TheSkullz for several weeks previous. Salty's ability to only get nipped once—which he attributed to a network hiccup causing server lag—was the result of his learning the encounter through repetition. First, let me offer a quick explanation of the first few pulls Salty (and others) took of the encounter. As the person who stands up by the chains and can look back, I literally had a bird's eye view of the group trying to coordinate. The very first pull, in spite of being told to all move at once and having a player (in this case Sally, from TheSkullz) mark her own head with an in-game raid marker so people had a target to follow, no one knew how to detect the cast of "lava pillar," the lava pillar exploded below seven players, and they all seven when flying into the air and fell to their deaths. This led to revelation one: watching the cast bar below Magmaw's name in the HUD at the top of the screen would allow people to see when the "lava pillar" cast began. This would be "one upped" days later by the update of a *WoW* add-on called Deadly Boss Mods (which I explain later in this chapter) that offered a literal warning with a countdown "timer" that clearly reads "next lava pillar" with a count in hundredths of a second. Upon finding the cast bar, Salty was able to start moving, but he found that moving when he saw the cast bar was still too late (as did several others), and for three pulls, anywhere from four to all seven of those players flew into the air and died again. On the fifth pull, Salty got the timing right, but he ended up ahead of the marked player, and the others stayed with the marked player, as they were told, and . . . yes, they blew up, went flying into the air, and died. Just as success in *WoW* is about timing, so sometimes is failure.

The next night, Salty had the new version of DBM, and hence had timers. The mark was placed on his head, and he also began, as a habit, saying "pillar, move" quickly and in monotone over Ventrilo just as the timer was about to expire. The first pull that night was choppy, as people still didn't quite "get" the timing, but by the second pull only one person was lagging behind. On the third pull, everyone made the first move.

It would be a full hour of miscues before a few non-participant players would realize that there was a second move, but soon the group mastered the mechanic of avoiding the lava pillar, killing the parasites, and Magmaw died for the very first time for TheSkullz. In the meantime, Lint and I had our own little feedback loop going with worm taunts, bites, and chains, but it followed the same basic premise, so I'll spare the recount of the number of chain leaps missed, the number of times the worm accidentally snacked on my goblin instead of Lint, etc.

Salty's pattern occurred in this set of rules, then: in order for the ten people in the raid group to defeat Magmaw, Salty and his fellow ranged DPS and healers must avoid the lava spew. The game doesn't care how; it only cares that the players do not get hit or that the other players can survive the encounter having lost the players who die to being hit. For Salty and his cohorts, however, they must move from one side to the other to control the lava pillar locations (Salty took me once to a random PUG so I could see what happens when people do not group, and the result was a haphazard spread of lava pillars and small armies of parasites coming from virtually any possible position). The narrative for Salty literally was: 1) lava pillar coming (denoted by timer and cast bar), 2) to not move is to be hit, so I should move, 3) don't die to parasites, and 4) repeat in other direction. I asked Salty if he had "learned" to dodge the lava pillar, and he said "well, yeah, even though I still get hit sometimes. I learned how to read the timers, when to move, how far to go. I cleaned it up." That's how Salty refined the story—consulting timers and cast bars to know when to move, using trial and error to get the distance of his movement correct, etc.—through the generation and acquisition of gamer knowledge.

### **INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVE: THE DISTANCE TO HERE: RAID PREPARATION**

Let's go back to the start of the "pull" of Magmaw, and let's stand next to Lint and look up at the massive worm. He didn't just walk in here. None of the ten players here "just" came to the raid this night, or any of the other nights over my months observing Flashpoint. In this section I will discuss the preparations made for raiding by walking through a different aspect of preparation with a few different participants. I don't wish to assert that anyone's experience here, of course, is absolute. The experiences of this particular group preparing to raid, however, were relatively

homogenous, and as a seasoned player myself, I had little trouble adapting to their style.

To begin to understand raid preparation, the best place to go is to the raid leader and tank, in this case, Lint. Informally speaking, based on the input of my participants and of other people I've spoken with during my research, tanking is the job that is most exhausting and most stress inducing for *WoW* players; I would learn much later in the research, when Lint suffered a real life injury and I had to take over as tank, just how tough it is. I knew the ins and outs of tanking as a practice when I joined Flashpoint because I knew that was a role that would allow me to give back to the group. For the two weeks before Flashpoint started raiding, though, I spent a number of my nights running "heroic random" dungeons with Lint, both of us trading off tank duty, to earn some gold to bolster the guild's supplies and to practice. As we went through that process, and of course on into the raiding schedule, I spoke at length with Lint about what it meant to prepare to raid tank.

"First, you have to be chill," he told me. "It's going to be my fault most of the time when we wipe, and you're going to hear me apologizing and then eventually raging over it." This, in my observation, is the plight of every tank, and it was something Lint took to heart each time we did much of anything. The role of the tank, again, is to hold the aggro of the enemies in any encounter. One nickname tanks are given in game is "meat shield," as the goal is for them to soak damage and hold attention while other things happen. On the surface, this probably sounds easy, and in some circumstances, it is. Lint and I have both talked about playing in dungeons where we were over-gear'd/over level and hence had vast statistical superiority, so we could grab aggro and essentially do something else in the other window. But in raid environments, maintaining aggro and mitigating damage can be quite challenging. It is usually, in fact, the limiting factor, more than doing enough damage. Can the tank stay alive?

The reason the role of tank is so stressful for players is that in a raid encounter like Magmaw, Lint is the only toon capable of taking more than one or two hits from Magmaw without dying. If he loses aggro, the only chance the raid has not to lose members in rapid succession is for one of the two plate-armor-wearing DPSs to grab aggro (the two Death Knights) and for Lint to taunt back off of that toon before a third hit lands. Magmaw would easily one-shot kill any of the other DPSs and

any of the healers. So, Lint losing aggro almost certainly means catastrophe for the group.

But the tank's responsibility is also to control the area and direct the fight, at least in as much as that the boss—or in the case of non-boss encounters the trash mobs—go where the tank takes them. In the Magmaw fight this isn't a major issue, as Lint can only make Magmaw look one way or the other—Magmaw is rooted to the floor. But in other encounters, such as the ones I described in previous chapters, Lint's ability to move a boss around the encounter space is critical to the other nine players being able to do their jobs. So, while it is true that a raid group is a ten-person unit where everyone has to work together to succeed, minor failures by the other nine toons can be worked around. A one-second lapse in judgment by the tank means the encounter is over.

Over that two-week preparation period, Lint did a number of things to prepare for the Flashpoint raid. He started by “hitting Tankspot and EJ,” meaning [www.tankspot.com](http://www.tankspot.com) and the Tankspot videos housed on YouTube and [www.Elitistjerks.com](http://www.Elitistjerks.com), a web forum run by one of the most successful guilds in all of *WoW* that is now closed but at the time served as a sort of think-tank (no pun intended) for anyone willing to venture into an atmosphere that is fairly aptly named, a collective of highly critical, often rude, but almost always correct players who do graduate-study-level math and an almost unspeakable number of trials to ensure that they have enough data to make their claims.

Tankspot's content is targeted at breaking down encounters from the tank's perspective, and as Lint was quick to point out to me, there were, before *Cataclysm* launched, a number of videos already posted (from Tankspot members in the beta test) that showed the basics of the early fights, like Magmaw. Lint linked me to a number of videos that he watched, and as he talked to me about them he started to sound less like someone discussing a video game and more like a basketball coach breaking down video of an opponent, looking for tendencies, and talking about what was working and wasn't. While watching one video, he said to me “see when the tank goes into Magmaw's mouth? Guardian spirit as it starts, then I'm counting . . . word of glory here \*a pause\* then here \*pause\* then here . . . that's going to help heals a bunch.” The spells Lint mentioned in the quote are Paladin self-heals, and he was actually building for himself a sort of timing cheat sheet based on the video so he could maximize his own ability to withstand damage during the worst part of the encounter.

Lint went on to read every bit of information he could about Magmaw on Tankspot.com (an amount he describes as “pages and pages, fool. Pages and pages”), and he watched the videos for the next three encounters and began studying them as well. As the day of the first raid came closer, he went ahead and watched videos for all of the raid content, though he spent most of his time concentrating on the first three or four encounters. The week before the first raid he even “pugged” into a run of Blackwing Descent so he could see the fight, though in that case he didn’t tank (he DPSed and told me he actually did less damage than usual so he could watch the tank carefully).

The experience of going to Elitist Jerks was less about the specific fight and more about insuring that his spec was correct. A “spec,” in *WoW* terms, is the set of talents that a player uses along with the glyphs he or she chooses to enhance those talents. I’ve included a visual representation of Lint’s spec as Figure 5. It is the stance of Blizzard that players can customize their specs in myriad ways and play effectively, but the Blizzard definition of “effective” and the Elitist Jerks definition of “effective” are not the same. The brain trust at Elitist Jerks is at its core a group of min/maxers, or gamers who look to get the maximum gain from the minimum input. While on the site, Lint used only one message board thread to tweak his Paladin, but that thread was, at that time, eighteen pages and included a number of links to external resources. The thread continued to grow, however, and was over fifty pages (of ten posts each) long when the site went offline. The authors of these posts are all dedicated gamers, each adding to the collective knowledge. There are, suggested in the thread, four “valid” raid specs for a tank in Cataclysm: The guardian (focusing on defense spells to aid other raid members), the striker (more single target DPS), the haymaker (more area of effect DPS—or crowd control), and the wogger (focusing on a specific self-healing spell). Each of the four has specific benefits, which Lint weighed carefully when considering what he, and what Flashpoint, needed. The wogger spec—which depended upon a spell called “Word of Glory” (hence the name “wog”er)—was about to be outmoded by a patch to the game that lessened the benefit of the spell, so Lint described to me the process of choosing among the other three. “It’s not a big difference,” he noted, “but the guardian spec has more protection for other raid members without much of a loss to DPS or threat, but I tweaked it a little based on some of the other posts. I like what I came up with.”

In addition to spec info, the Elitist Jerks thread included lists of potential gear, gems and enchants, the best professions for the class, and a suggested “rotation” of talents to use in combat. Lint pointed out that these haven’t changed greatly since he first learned, but he did find nice solutions to problems that the arrival of the expansion had brought him, particularly in terms of how to compensate for changes to key abilities, like his area of effect threat spell, consecrate, which was moved from a ten-second cooldown to a thirty-second cooldown (meaning it could be used only a third as often as before).

Through the Elitist Jerks discussion thread, Lint found that he could “move it in the rotation and count more on my [avenger’s] shield and the new proc [wherein some general movements trigger a “free” extra avenger’s shield cast]. That’ll work.”

Looking at Lint’s spec in print is a bit like reading a vague personal ad on a dating site; it’s not really “him,” nor does any of the texture his play brings to the toon shine through, but it is an artifact that reflects his gaming experience, a document of record of the narrative I keep trying to capture.

Moreover, narratives emerge from all of this knowledge that can be shared: explanations of the four specs, reflections on what a player should do if he or she chooses a specific profession, what glyphs and enchants to use, how to open a fight with high threat to maintain aggro: all of these things are repeated and confirmed, polished and, at least as much as gaming knowledge can be, “canonized” as replicable, and oft replicated, actions. These finally, then, upon study by the gamer, translate into practices taken by individual players, replicating and eventually transforming some to stories to share while retaining others as material knowledge for future consultation (e.g., images of encounters, of specs, etc.). It is, in fact, quite similar to how one might learn to complete any of a number of tasks with two distinct differences: there’s no unified “authority,” “boss,” or “teacher” here (ethos is earned through success and innovation, but it doesn’t adhere the way it might in a workplace) and unlike so many of the learning tasks that are often the focus of study, gamers choose to learn these things as their pass time, as they unwind from work or the other stresses of their lives.



Figure 5. Lint's Spec. ©2010 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved.

### GETTING GEAR AND STOCKING SUPPLIES: WORLD OF WORKCRAFT

My other participants tell similar stories of their road to being raid-ready. Iceman wasn't as concerned with specs and rotations (as he knew that already) but spent a tremendous amount of time running heroic level dungeons and gaining reputation with various factions while training his professions so he could have the best possible gear. He told me, in par-

ticular, of an all-nighter the day before the first raid because he “needed a fucking wand. I had a green—that’s a stat killer.” A “green” item is of only moderate value, a step below blue (which is rare), purple (which is epic—what most raiders have and expect others to have) and the elusive, nearly impossible to obtain orange legendary. “I had to keep queuing for randoms to hope for Grim Batol so I could beat that second boss and hope he had my wand!” he said, as I myself recalled tanking several of the runs that night to help him.

For Salty, though, raid prep was a bit different still. Salty has taken on, as his pseudonym might lead one to expect, the role of being the guild’s fisherman and cook. He is also the herb gatherer, supplying the guild’s alchemist—which happened to be me at that time—with materials to make flasks and potions. Flasks, potions, and buff food are three critical elements of raiding because they carry significant statistical increases (often each—a potion, a flask, and a food item—will improve stats more than a single upgraded piece of gear). In many guilds, as Iceman and Lint were quick to remind me, leadership insists that the individual raiders provide their own food, flasks, and potions, but in Flashpoint the goal was to ensure that casual raiders were well prepared, so the guild split up the labor of gathering everything so that no one had to do without. Early on, though, “splitting it up” between the small core that existed two weeks previous to the first raid (Lint, Iceman, Salty, Leah, myself, and one other player who was rarely online) meant a huge chunk of labor for only a few people. Lint was busy learning all his tanking duties. Iceman—who maintained raid-level toons on two different servers—was off raiding and learning encounters and gearing himself. Leah took it upon herself to provide gold so that the guild could afford to repair gear (damage is incurred with each encounter, particularly if a player dies, and as one might guess from my explanations, dying as the group faces new encounters is quite common), so most of her time was spent playing on the *WoW* auction house the way many play on eBay, buying low, selling high, determining what was sparse and locating it to turn a profit. That left Salty and me to do the other preparation tasks.

To catch the fish that are needed for “end game” (meaning raid quality) fish feasts, which was what Flashpoint needed, a toon would need a fishing rating of 450. The rating goes up fast for the first one hundred points (every catch), but at one hundred it slows to one point every 5–8 catches. I didn’t literally do the math, but I know that to get to 450 both Salty and myself earned an achievement for catching one thousand fish,

then two thousand fish, and we were still fishing. A player must also level cooking to 450 to make the feast, but luckily all the fish caught along the way can be cooked, so the two skills level symbiotically. Once of the proper level, the fisherman must then locate the right areas to catch the fish needed. A raid feast at the time of my research—the seafood magnifique feast—was made by cooking two highland guppy, two lavascale catfish, and two fathom eel. On a typical raid progression raid night—attempting any new content—a group will go through 20–30 of these. This meant that Salty (and me, to a lesser extent) needed to catch 180 fish of a specific type for each night of raiding, with two caveats: highland guppy and fathom eel can be fished from pools, which means that a fisherman can look for places where they can be caught and fish them up relatively easily (four to six catches per pool), but lavascale catfish don't swim in schools, so there's a truly random element to catching them, and, of course, starting from zero the guild needed to build a stockpile. Hence there was a great deal of fishing.

The knowledge involved in fishing in *WoW* is somewhat minimal: Salty regularly checks [www.Wowhead.com](http://www.Wowhead.com) to see what open water yield rates are for specific areas, but otherwise, it's a matter of repeated click to cast, watch for bob, click to reel in activity. But the practice of fishing nestles into an interesting position as a *WoW* activity is necessary; it is at times tedious, but it is also an act that allows for tremendous amounts of multitasking.

I asked Salty what he does while he fishes. His response was “I usually watch TV, or listen to music. Sometimes I browse, read *WoWhead*, etc.” He went on to tell me about watching specific movies, or sporting events, while fishing, but what stuck with me was that he was fishing, I was fishing, and we were talking about when he fishes. Then we talked about raiding. Then we talked about his toon. Then other guildies logged in, and we chatted casually. We were, essentially, fishing the way I understood it in the real world, minus the physical elements of the worms and water, but with much better luck than at least I have ever had in real life.

### **ADD-ONS AND THE APPLICATION OF MATERIAL KNOWLEDGE TO THE INTERFACE**

The last point of stress from Iceman, as a raid leader, was that everyone had to install the proper raiding add-ons and user interface tweaks.

While to some user interface changes might seem—and even be—highly cosmetic, the additional utility that can be tapped by taking on other people’s material knowledge, encapsulated in various modules, is powerful. See Figure 6, the *WoW* default UI and Figure 7, a DPS UI set up as Iceman requested for raiding.



Figure 6. *WoW* default UI. ©2010 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved.

Iceman was very specific about certain add-ons he expected each raid member to have. The first, and “most critical” was *Deadly Boss Mods*, a robust add-on that adds timers and warnings for some specific raid events, the very add-on that rescued Salty from the lava pillars. *DBM* encapsulated via material knowledge the timing cues and crafts counters that do not exist in game. It is interesting that some gaming purists might consider *DBM*—and, in fact, even websites like *WoWhead*—to be “cheating,” but that mentality doesn’t exist in *WoW*. These add-ons don’t cheat, but they do augment the narrative by holding pieces of the story that is about to unfold, like an interactive *Cliff’s Notes* version of major encounters.



Figure 7. Customized Raid UI. ©2010 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved.

The other elements that Iceman requested that raiders have were less intensive in terms of what they add to the game but are far more visually apparent. The first was a program called power auras, which displays a visual effect on the screen when a particular event happens. This is user-designated; the example in Figure 7 is a Death Knight who has forgotten a buff (so the power aura is present to make the player aware that she needs to cast the spell for the buff). The next was a pair of monitoring modules, recount—which keeps statistics like damage done, healing done, a death log, etc. and displays this data for future reference, as a DPS will want to DPS better, a healer to heal more, etc.—and Omen—a threat meter so that each player knew how close he or she was from pulling a target away from the tank. There’s also Titan Panel, a small toolbar that holds information like game access latency, how much gold the player has, the state of the player’s gear (how close to broken vs. repaired), and a host of slots for other add-ons (such as toggle switches for Omen and Recount, should the player want them off the screen for a short period). The other add-ons were visual replacements for existing elements that add to functionality. The first of these was bartender, a program that allows for the movement and reconfiguration of the toolbars that hold skills/spells. The change this makes to the user’s ability to access skills is dramatic, as can be seen in the two screenshots above. Added to this was a small program called “OmniCC” that places cooldown timers on the buttons for any skill (showing the user when it is usable again,

or “cooled down”). Related to casting, typically a player saw a small cast bar when completing any ability, but the add-on Quartz made that bar much larger and prominent. It also adds large cast bars for opponents and bosses. Rounding out the collection were two minor UI swaps: an add-on called Mappy that makes the map larger and more functional (removing the oddly imposed circular shape that Blizzard coded into the game) and a chat add-on called PRAT which allowed for color coding and font changes to the chat box, making in-game chat easier to read.

These add-ons, as I mentioned before, are fantastic examples of in-game digital artifacts holding material knowledge, as they allow a user to take his or her specific knowledge and encapsulate it into something others can download and use, preserved as accessible material knowledge. They also dramatically change the gaming experience, something that Iceman pointed out one night when playing on a different machine. “Fuck! I don’t have counters!” he said, repeatedly, as he was hit by everything from lava pillars to spewing cones of cold, and the lack of his specific bartender key binds left him typing random characters into chat when he attempted to reflexively react with a spell, since in an interface without bartender, the quotation-mark key simply places a quotation mark (") in the chat window.

### BACK TO THE “PULL:” THE MAGMAW DANCE

So, I return again to standing next to Lint as he pulls Magmaw. I realized, while reading my account of that specific encounter, even as I checked my field notes, screen caps, logs, etc., that it feels shockingly familiar. There is a reason for that. The basic Magmaw encounter, as I described it here, is a moment of neat, virtually perfect proof of my hypothesis that *WoW* gaming is highly practiced and can feel like the stylized rereading of a single narrative. Every week, I virtually stand next to Lint, my stocky little goblin twitching and holding a sword roughly the size of his body in each hand, and we stare at a worm the height of a building. I turn every week and see Salty and Leah, already placing heal-over-time spells on Lint, on me, and on Iceman, the latter of which pacing in game as I imagine he would in real life as he finishes his spiel. Then, crackling over the headphones, Iceman says “time for a ready check,” and a box pops up. I click ready, as does everyone else. Then Lint counts down from three, and we do what I described in the middle of the chapter, moving like a well-choreographed dance of dangerous pixels, now habitually doing what we concentrated so hard on making sure we did that first night.

Magmaw is a copy of a copy of a copy. Sometimes the group composition changed a bit, but the roles remained the same. Each time, we did exactly what we did that very first time, because the plan worked, the research was done, the tools were there, and the replication of those practices, with the right timing, meant success. We knew that encounter because we learned it. We knew Magmaw's story beginning to end. The only time it went differently is if someone made a mistake, and that person often had to face a friendly but harsh criticism, first from Iceman, then slowly from everyone else if it happened more than once.

At the end of my research period, I checked my character statistics. During my time with Flashpoint, we killed Magmaw thirty-six times. Thirty-six times replicating those patterns, each time a little faster to the kill, each time gaining confidence in each other because repetition of success directly equates to ethos in *WoW*.

One of the things that an explanation in text might minimize that is important to remember is that I was able, here, to divide up the roles to describe them. And I was able to speak of them in a single voice. In the game, nine other people are enacting the other nine of those roles and speaking out nine of those sets of dialogue, and it's all happening so quickly that a matter of milliseconds of network lag—fractions of a second—can result in failure. It looks like a simple narrative, but when all of the pieces are moving, it's quite cumbersome to balance.

This places primacy on three key elements: (a) an understanding of the nature of the entire encounter (not just what "I" do, but what the royal "you" do), (b) an understanding of why and how each thing happens, and (c) the wherewithal, agency and confidence to read and react, knowing oneself but also knowing what the group can do, how the narrative can be changed. That's what it takes to kill a gigantic lava worm. That's how success or failure is measured in a raid. That's how raiding turns a playful game into a complicated task. In the raid environment, not knowing something is only a detriment if one refuses to say something; the learning is part and parcel of the game experience itself. And there are nine people there who are pretty sure it's important that the remaining person learn, and learn correctly and competently, what to do.

## 6 Failure? Or, “Once We Down Her on Normal, We Go Do It on Heroic”

*It's late in the raid night when we find ourselves in the chamber ruled by Alysrazor, a phoenix, quite literally a gigantic firebird, and to say we aren't welcome would be an understatement. We have been on what we initially considered a fool's errand: a run to attempt to complete the full set of quite challenging raid “achievements” in the Firelands, the reward from which would be a purple firebird mount that each of us could fly around Azeroth atop, our own little grape Alysrazors. No one on the server had come close, and the reason was the challenge in the chamber we faced.*

*Defeating Alysrazor was not particularly difficult; other than a pair of ten-second tornado barrages, the encounter wasn't difficult to handle. But fighting a firebird results in one thing, to be sure: an abundance of fire. To complete the achievement, we would have to all ten survive the fight—something we had never done—and we would have to avoid being hit not just by the flaming tornadoes that troubled us so for their ten seconds, but also random fire spells cast by Alysrazor's minions on the ground, the fire spewed by the worms that she dines upon at random intervals and the fire Alysrazor herself blasts here and there. No one could get hit by a single bit of fire in the entire ten-minute (or so—this one would clock at 8:55) encounter.*

*“This isn't going to be pretty,” Iceman said, “But we can do it.” I grit my goblin teeth and dig into the feast set before us, upping my stamina for reasons that will not help me with the fire dodging but is traditional before any boss fight. “Be ready to wipe a few times here.”*

*The first attempt, just like the nightmare where I show up to class in only my boxer shorts, is my mistake for the night: trying to insure that I dodge the lava spew from a worm, I run into a corner and box myself in while fire*

swirls. I take a hit. “Crap. I’m on fire, guys.” The wipe was expected, so no one feels bad but me. At least that’s how it seems.

Minutes later, our most reliable healer takes a frontal blast from a worm. The next attempt, we get to the tornados and our hunter runs right into the first one. The next attempt we get to the tornados again and our paladin thinks that his immunity bubble will work, but the achievement calls for being hit, not for taking damage. After that, twice in a row that same paladin fails to run the tornado gauntlet. He gets it right the next time, but, in the shock of all shockers, Iceman, our raid leader, nips the edge of the last tornado in the phase.

“Fuck! SON OF A! I DID NOT HIT THAT!”

For what it’s worth, it really didn’t look like he hit that, but the game doesn’t lie. At least as of now, WoW is incapable of actual spite.

The next attempt, Iceman is psyched out, and he runs right into a tornado trying to avoid the one in front of him. At this point, it’s been a while, and spirits are getting low. “Fuck, I’m sorry guys! It’s just one run! We only have to do this once. I’ll get my head out of my ass. Let’s do this.”

On the next attempt, Salty mysteriously gets hit two seconds into the fight. None of us even see the fire that hit him, nor do we understand where it could have come from. We just all know it’s time to die and try again.

The attempt after that, the group had razor focus during the tornado phase, and Ventrilo is a mess of people calling out spacing instructions to each other. Near the end of the phase, I feel my heart pounding in my chest: if I hit one of these things on a run where everyone’s perfect, I’m going to hate myself. The phase ends. We’re okay. The attempt continues to go well as we near the second tornado phase. We all spread out and prepare to run. The tornados appear.

Then they vanish.

“What the?”

A message pops up on the screen: “Achievement: Glory of the Firelands Raider.” I hear Iceman laughing over Vent. “My last combustion killed the fucker!”

Later that night, after finishing the raid, the ten of us rode around Orgrimmar like the world’s weirdest biker gang, an assortment of miscreants flying purple firebirds. We’d done something no one else on the server—and few in the world—had pulled off. It was, to quote Salty, “Rub it in their face time.”

## BECAUSE WE FAIL, WE SUCCEED: THE SPIRIT OF GAMING AS INQUIRY

If storytellers—I am thinking particularly here of my fellow instructors of digital media writing in the computers and writing community, though this need not be a restrictive thing—were to look at composing and collaboration like a gamer—and I must say, to this point not even gaming studies has done nearly as much of this as I believe it should, much less other fields—there would be numerous instances where the discussion would include, if not focus upon, failure. Of course, in academia we don’t fail in the same way that gamers fail, but maybe we should. Clearly the stakes, within the construction, are different, as writing failure is not life-and-death. But the very spirit of MMO gaming is the group form of the “probing” that James Gee (2007) discussed in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, or to greatly simplify his idea while retaining the spirit of it, the mantra that Flashpoint spouts on every new encounter, due in no small part to my pointing it out: try and die, try and die.

An example of this is the paladin in the anecdote I used to start this chapter. He had a spell that gave him a “bubble”—a shield that nothing can damage him through for approximately ten seconds. Ten seconds of horrifying tornados to dodge + ten seconds of bubble (9.7, actually, but close enough) = ? He chose to try it. He was halfway successful. He did not take any damage. This would mean that after the achievement run, which required him to not get hit at all, he could forever stand still with his bubble and avoid the *Benny Hill*-like mess of the other raid members running in circles. This led to two innovations for the group, however. Because of his revelation, I realized that my Death Knight’s anti-magic shell could take two tornado hits, so while I still had to run, I could mess up twice and still take no damage. Our mages realized that their ice block skill—which is like a bubble but doesn’t allow them to move, encasing the caster in a block of ice—could likewise defray the tornado damage. Risk = reward. More importantly, the bubble mechanic mixed with a spell called “hand of sacrifice” that allowed the Paladin to take the damage being dealt to another player meant that when running the fire tornado circle all ten members could watch each other and call out if someone was going to take tornado damage, allowing the Paladin to cast the spell and defray that damage. This dramatically changed how Flashpoint addressed that difficult to coordinate portion of an encoun-

ter, a moment where so much depends on speed and awareness. But it is only through accepting the potential for failure that these revelations came. To approach the encounter conservatively, to fear the risk, would mean such moments of learning like this could not happen. This has to be a story of failure to ever be a story of victory.

### WOW, THAT'S COLLABORATION

While considering these moments of collaboration, I'd like to revisit chapter 5 and Flashpoint's time with Magmaw, the gigantic lava worm. While I shared in that chapter an account of a *successful* encounter with the beast, the members of the group—mostly together<sup>18</sup>—learned that encounter in slow, painful collaborative steps just like what I enumerated above. While it might look easy in chapter 5 because I was writing about an encounter the group knew, it was nearly as time consuming to master Magmaw with TheSkullz as it was to learn Alysrazor with Flashpoint. The pains that can emerge from this collaborative form of learning come clearer in the undercurrents of chapter 4 as I discussed TheSkullz inability to master and defeat the blind dragon Atramedes, another encounter that took numerous failures for the group to finally complete. What might not be as clear in those accounts is precisely how the raid progressed in terms of sheer data. To illustrate how a group learns a fight in terms of bulk numbers, allow me to offer some numbers. At the start of this chapter I mentioned a night in which Flashpoint finished a difficult achievement in an encounter with a flame bird called Alysrazor. Before actually defeating the bird for the first time, Flashpoint attempted the encounter multiple times, as shown in the statistics below.

Total number of raid nights spent learning encounter: 3

Total hours: 9.5

Number of attempts: 123

Number of attempts that ended after approximately four minutes due to one or another person being hit by a fire tornado: 51

Number of players involved in all 123 attempts: 9 (the final spot was held by four different people over the course of the three nights)

Number of attempts longer than four minutes that resulted in the group going further into the encounter: 69 (with one

totally botched attempt and two attempts at circumventing the tornados)

What interests me most about this chunk of data is that after the 124<sup>th</sup> attempt when Alysrazor died for the first time, Alysrazor would also die on the 125<sup>th</sup>, 126<sup>th</sup>, 127<sup>th</sup>, and 128<sup>th</sup> attempts by the group, which were completed over the course of the following weeks. What this means is that it wasn't until more than a month after completing the encounter successfully for the first time that the group failed to complete the encounter in a single attempt in a successive week. This same principle was true for nearly every encounter in my research. The group would go in, learn, then come back and execute week after week. Their advancement was not only collaborative but illustrates how what Henry Jenkins (2006, 2008) called a field of collective knowledge works: I do not, to this day, know how to properly heal in the Alysrazor encounter, or really any encounter Flashpoint completed, as I never had to play that role, but I know what to do to insure that the healers can keep me alive, when to assist them, etc. The healing part wasn't mine to undertake, and it wasn't my piece of the collective knowledge to archive and maintain. That was Salty and Leah's part. Again, here, the importance of knowing roles and executing within the collaborative raid group emerges: as one member of the group, I have to do what I do in the narrative each time, and I need to do it correctly, basically like I did the last time: I need to communicate certain things, I need to listen for certain things, and I need to be ready to apply everything I know to compensate if something goes wrong. But I don't know everything about the encounter; no one in the group does. No one in any group ever would, in theory, unless that person played multiple toons and hence, at one point or another, was in every single role.

I sometimes wonder, when I discuss this with others, if perhaps I undersell it because it either sounds simple or obvious, but I want to stop and dwell for a moment on what I've just written: Flashpoint, for the majority of my research, was anywhere from 13–15 people. Ten of those people—often a core nine with one of the others—would raid for three to four hours or more, three nights a week. They'd encounter challenges, apply their knowledge to it, probe it, talk about it, poke at it, throw sticks at it, swing axes and swords at it, and throw fireballs at it, and when all the virtual smoke cleared and all the virtual clanging of weapons was silent, they'd learned the narrative of that event and were ready to commit it to the rotation. Together. They could then execute it. Each executing

a specific, well understood, and mutually respected role. They'd fight. Together. In harmony. With remarkable efficiency. With unified vision even without an authoritarian force from any of the members. They (we) chose to go do things, learned to do them, did them, went to find more things to do, enjoyed it, and tallied successes, and they (we) did it without becoming angry with each other, without struggling for power or being asked to do something they would rather not do, and most importantly, I think, without ever being overwhelmed by despair over the numerous failures involved in succeeding.

One hundred and twenty-four tries for one win. No one cried. No one blamed anyone for the 123 failures. No one threw in the towel. I was part of it, and sometimes I still find it fascinating. I ask myself how I managed, myself, to watch my little goblin's virtual body die 123 times at the hands of the flaming bird without losing my little goblin mind. I maintained focus, as did the other nine raiders. That's not how it works. And that, in my eyes, is the most anyone could ever hope for from collaborative work.

I realize this has to read as celebratory. In a way it is, as I can see no reason not to express the positive nature of these encounters. Flashpoint was an atypical raid group. Once the core members settled in, the group was almost the ideal model of what a guild could do. In a way, I wish there had been more conflicts, as I fear the utopian narrative. At the same time, a storyteller tells the truth. To minimize would be just as damaging to the history I've constructed as it would be to over-sell.

Gaming collaboration overall is not idyllic; as I pointed out in chapter 4, there are certainly times when people cannot and will not work together or when the group simply doesn't come together in a productive way. The positive take away from seeing that incongruence is that all those players went on to find working collaborations, but obviously things can and do go wrong with game collaboration. And most casual players who find random or PUG groups in *WoW* will have an experience that is far more chaotic, and often far more hurtful, than my accounts here. But the adage is write what you know, and by my luck, this was the group I found and followed and got to know.

## ISSUES OF IDENTITY: GAMING AND BEYOND

At the end of the previous section I began to reflect upon the identity of Flashpoint, even without specifically meaning to, as group identity

is in many ways inescapable when looking at the ability to collaborate. My months with Flashpoint showed me the humming machine of group identity in functional production—in the moments like the one I just related, learning to defeat Alysrazor—and the moments of almost total breakdown due to identity fractures, as I covered to near exhaustion when discussing Sally and TheBearTank.

While much has been said already in digital rhetoric and Internet research as relates to digital identity, there exists a group based digital identity that we must understand and account for as scholarship on gaming and social media moves forward. In particular, I think the interplay between IRL and digital identities that I've noted in this project needs to be further explored and cultivated, as I believe we have a far richer understanding of what it means to belong to an IRL collective and claim that as an identity, but we are several steps behind adapting that into our conception of digital identity. The overwhelming view in popular media is a cliché "this generation can only communicate with their technology!" refrain, a damaging misrepresentation of how identities work in digital space. As scholars continue to point the lens at digital spaces where a "real" identity is a fixture at the center of the construction, consideration of the sort of idealized and "tried on" identities of the early internet and how those practices intertwine with a selective filtering of the real with an idealized and/or experimental, or simply highly rhetorically constructed fiction will become critical, as will the consideration of how all those other identities that exist in the virtual landscape contribute to that identity while forming yet another collective identity. Gamers aren't vacationing online, they're establishing lives there. They're working there as much as they work in the real world, and scholarship should reflect that. The primacy that some place on the "real," while deeply entrenched in tradition and certainly worthy of our respect, stands the very real risk of allowing our collective sense of what is actually "real" to become antiquated. Material space and the idea of seeing people "face-to-face" doesn't carry the same importance in 2017 that it did even a decade, and certainly a century, earlier. Iceman, for example, would greet me after any day that I didn't login to *WoW* with "I didn't see you last night," addressing me both in language and in sentiment as if there was a place where we went, where I was expected, and where I did not appear. The game space is that "real" to him (and to me, and to the others in the group).

We need to think about the influence of individuals on the collective and the collective on individuals, and this will mean understanding what exactly the collective and the individual claim to be, practice as, and strive to be considered. It will no longer be enough, as research moves forward, to say things like “and this happened as part of a Facebook discussion page” or “in their raid group;” such generalizations obscure a large portion of what is really happening and ignore the careful rhetorical moves made in unison by the collectives being essentially minimized by short, standard description. Flashpoint’s gaming is a serious pursuit by people who are invested and who in the scope of *WoW* have become masters of a very particular set of skills and the nuanced, socially based collaborative ways to maximize those skills for the achievement of goals.

**NOBODY PUTS DK IN A CORNER: WHAT I  
LEARNED ABOUT COLLABORATING AND FAILING  
AND WHY IT MATTERS TO WRITERS**

Gamespace is where many people are headed, if they aren’t there already. As humans become more interconnected through digital collaborative spaces, and as more and more people join the growing legions of online gamers, the value of what the gaming community can show all of us about who we are, how we think, how we communicate, and what we choose to do with our time and efforts will exponentially increase. From the classroom to the boardroom, from the local bar to the sports arena, from the mall to the hospital, people network and become the composition of networks. As we look at how they work, so too must we look at how they play, how they interact, and how they live. My participants came to *WoW* to have fun, but as it turns out, Iceman, Leah, Lint and Salty taught me a great deal about what it means to be a goblin, just as almost a year before a circle of women showed me what it meant to be Sasha. I’ve become a better person, a better thinker, a better scholar, and a better learner. A better writer. I’ve been able to locate a place where my ancestral storyteller’s rhetoric can thrive. I came away with virtual dragons to fly over a virtual countryside, with an impressive coffer of virtual gold, and with a number of fantastic, ornate arsenal of virtual weapons. I came away with thirteen friends, and I leave their virtual world knowing that as long as any of them still play, there’s always a place for me to go be a goblin with a friend and do more goblin stuff, to tell more goblin stories. It’s a place where, much like in the television series *Cheers*, some-

one will yell “Phill” when I walk into the virtual room, and my gigantic mushroom stool at the bar will always be waiting. But most importantly, I came away from that place with a long, beautiful story of my own, with a rich understanding of another world—a world with 11.5 million virtual residents searching for something real in a place some might never think to look. I hope that I have done their story justice. I hope that I have shared at least some of what they have to tell all of us.

## 7 Conclusion: We Don't Live Here Anymore

*It's hour thirty-six of Global Game Jam and I need to clear my head...*

*I mean: \*cough\**

*I stand at the edge of the Twisting Nether, my drawn warglaives wet with the blood of the demons I've just slaughtered. It's been years, but it comes back quickly, the click, the clack, the whirl of blades, the slashes and gashes.*

*Out of the corner of my eye, I spy Lint, and with a nod I wish an old friend hello.*

*"How have you been? Long time no see!"*

*"Eh, alright. Work is shit this time of year, but the kids are good, so I can't complain."*

*I flash a toothy smile as I chuckle in Lint's direction before launching myself onto another demon lord, plunging the blades deeper. Muscle memory. Click. Clack. Click. Click.*

*"Anyone else around?"*

*"Salty raids until he passes out most nights. I'm running with this guild that reminds me of TheSkullz."*

*I pocket the gold and crystals from the demon, then spying another, I sprint and leap.*

*"What ever happened to Sally, anyway? You two talk anymore?"*

*"She blocked me about a year ago, and I never see her around town. I think she's gone."*

*"Leah?"*

*Click. Click. Click.*

*"She left, too. She was getting shit from people..."*

*I extract the demon's blood from my latest kill. "Iceman?"*

*"He was here for a week or so when the new stuff dropped, but he wasn't into it anymore."*

*I sit, looking Lint up and down.*

*“Where you headed?”*

*“Dailies,” he says, lumbering toward a huge worm with fur and horns.*

*I don’t say another word. I just leap over his shoulder and sink my blades in. He flings his shield at the next furry horny worm.*

*It’s always time to do work.*

*Click*

I think of Azeroth fondly, but before my recent check-in during a work break at Global Game Jam in early 2017, I hadn’t been back to the place where I spent my evenings with Lint, Salty, Sally, Iceman, and the others since I finished my research, for a little over four years and two expansion packs. As my opening anecdote here illustrates, I actually found Lint within a few minutes of logging in, but other than him and Salty, the group was gone. A reunion tour wasn’t in the cards.

I can’t say that this surprised me. The playing field has changed since Phill the goblin Death Knight last spit ice and clanged steel. *WoW* is no longer as big as it once was, and it’s far from the most popular MMO, now dwarfed by the one-hundred-million-player population of *League of Legends*. Since my moment of research, the #GamerGate incident and the fallout from the obnoxious threats issues to Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeezian, and others has also rocked the landscape.

Lint wasn’t sure if it was threatening behavior that drove Sally away, as apparently the two of them had reconciled and feuded again since last I’d seen him, and all he knew was that he hadn’t visually noticed her around in-game. He did know that threats were what caused Leah to leave, however, as apparently in the aftermath of all the Gamergate discussions within *WoW*, rude, overwhelming, obnoxious, and presumably male players targeted her. Others from the group had left for other reasons; Salty had fled to a new server to find more active raiders, and Iceman had returned to his busy life offline, no longer finding the game worth the investment of time and money.

## THE BIASES

At my first academic job interview I talked extensively about my *WoW* research. I was asked four different times by the same faculty member if I was “addicted” to the game and two other times if I considered the game’s addictive nature a threat to young players. I reported, much

as I just did above, that I hadn't played the game in years. Much like Iceman, I didn't have the time. I was clearly not an addict myself, as I went from playing for over twenty hours a week to not playing at all right at the point that I had to start writing what you're reading.

But the question, as much as it felt like an attempt to troll a younger scholar who works in digital media, made me stop to think about how my time identifying as that little goblin Death Knight still lingered as a part of my identity. The topper on my wedding cake wore the Death Knight helm of Arthas, the Lich King. A figurine of Sasha from a service called Figure Prints sits on my desk at work. I keep talking to a tattoo-artist friend about putting a DK helm on my shoulder. It might seem weird to go back to Azeroth, and things may very well have changed during my time away, but much like the nature of history itself, I will always have the stories that keep Flashpoint fresh in my mind.

### THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

In my new life, one of my duties is Co-Directing the Varsity Esports team on my campus. Esports is, generally speaking, a young person's game. TL Taylor (2015) has produced a fantastic, rich history of the rise of Esports, but the key point I wish to make is about ethos. A forty-year-old man no longer has the "twitch" response speed to be considered a viable, elite Esports athlete, and while I will most certainly play the card game *Hearthstone* and will end up studying *League of Legends*, I cannot compete with my players, just as my high school basketball coach couldn't defend my drives to the lane years ago. But having been in a once ranked *WoW* raiding guild secures me the Esports Gamer credibility to allow me to connect with players and network within that scene. In that way, the stories that made up Phill the Death Knight continue to operate in the world and persist as a facet of my identity.

When I lectured to my team-taught Esports class about competitive *WoW* players, I mentioned my research in passing. Those who were intrigued by the subject of Esports stayed for hours afterward, asking me to retell stories of my adventures, asking what it was like to treat gaming as work, etc.

## THE END OF THE ERA OF HOPE

I would be remiss to not address one of the topics I initially tried to hedge in this book but realize, in a post #Gamergate world, I need to address. In chapter 3, when I talk about Sally and Lint's interactions, I realize that some could read the power dynamic as troubling due to gender. I looked over the transcripts and reports I built from those raid nights with the distance of time, and it does appear, as definitively as it can, that Sally was the aggressor in those cases. I also still find a mild level of shock when I read her lengthy "confession" private message chain where she talked about essentially trying to exert power over Lint. This runs so counter to what the stereotype would be, of the male members attempting to oppress or insult the female member, that I nearly removed it from my book out of fear that I'd be viewed as misogynistic. But my loyalty as a scholar is to the story, and the story itself is compelling if atypical. To tinker with the data or ignore that key moment would be to misrepresent a lived narrative, to shortchange Flashpoint by watering down its origin.

I do not believe this same interaction between Lint and Sally would have happened in many other guilds, that a guild could have a female leader and a male raid leader and have discord and in-fighting without the gender politics being a big part of it (as honestly the gender issues only related to the fake jealous boyfriend anecdote; Lint and Iceman had no gendered biases toward Sally, and in fact Leah, who they involved in all of the decision making, was a young woman of the same age). In the aftermath of #Gamergate and the threats sent to female game developers and gamers, I'm almost positive that if that same group—the people who made up TheSkullz—were still together, someone would have attacked Sally had the topic arose in conversation. I say that because while I realize I present Flashpoint in a positive light in almost all of this book, that's not an attempt to wear blinders or to embrace the myth of technology saving the day. There were people in TheSkullz that fit the profile of the aggressive young white males who perpetuated the bad behavior and threats of #GamerGate. And TheBearTank would most certainly have attacked Sally had the two ever co-existed, based on his behavior toward other players in the group. Finally, as I shared in chapter 2, I saw Sally take fire from someone hateful during an early raid during the "safer" pre-Gamergate era. I have no doubt that I missed a number of horrible moments being away from Azeroth for GamerGate. While it does mark my data as a

bit aged, I am glad for that. I wouldn't have wanted my study to have fallen into the chaos of that event.

For myself, I can attest that it only took me five minutes to get into an uncomfortable conversation upon returning to Azeroth. There was a discussion of the new President in the capital city, and someone mentioned the Dakota oil pipeline, making a derogatory comment about "social justice warriors." I engaged briefly, but I found that now, even more so than five-years-ago, *WoW* is not a place where there exists high-minded public discourse. The public chat channels are still minefields, now seemingly a bit more sinister, though that could be the bias of these political times.

### A CHEROKEE LENS

The most important thing to emerge from this study is that regardless of reception, I have crafted a Cherokee method of studying gamer identities. I realize, once again, that this might seem as if there is a great deal of slippage, as at conferences and talks I've had theorists and social scientists claim that my data isn't coded correctly or that my study lacks rigor. The reality is that there are only a few ways to code something so massive without the study becoming quantitative (and in places, I did that sort of work—counting attempts at attacking a boss, instances of specific phrases, etc.). What I did instead is treat the stories themselves as a unit of measure, the accounts of each player, each session, and also the collective involved in each session. This allowed for me to see the similarities and differences in game-play behaviors, but it also allowed me to see how roles are taken on; how success and failure are interpreted, negotiated, and acted upon; and how concessions are made and needs are met. I saw the identities of these players in the digital environment as complex, living stories because instead of choosing to doggedly chase one specific type of data, I instead allowed the data to speak, allowed the stories to tell themselves and be retold. I managed to do non-ethnographic research that functions like ethnography in that it puts the participants first and centers on their behavior. I also managed to avoid the pitfall of self-bias by openly embracing that I had a role to play in the proceedings and that, just like a traditional storyteller, there was no invalidation resulting from the storyteller being a part of the story, just as there's no invalidation in me addressing you, my reader, directly now and again. All of those tra-

ditional measures (don't use second person, don't put yourself in your research, keep your data narrow) work counter to what I've done here.

This methodology is informed by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who wrote in *Decolonizing Methodologies*:

Research is linked in all disciplines to theory. Research adds to, is generated from, creates or broadens our theoretical understandings. Indigenous peoples have been, in many ways, oppressed by theory. Any consideration of the ways our origins have been examined, our histories recounted, our arts analyzed, our cultures dissected, measured, torn apart and distorted back to us will suggest that theories have not looked sympathetically or ethically at us . . . [t]he development of theories by indigenous scholars which attempt to explain our existence in contemporary society (as opposed to the "traditional" society constructed under modernism) has only just begun...At some points there is, there has to be, dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions. This has to be because we constantly collide with dominant views while we are attempting to transform our lives...[t]his means struggling to make sense of our own world while attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful. (2012, pp. 39–40)

In application to my work, Smith's words ring particularly true. When I speak of doing Indigenous work with video games, people ask if I'm going to talk about *Custer's Revenge* or *Red Dead Redemption*, or more recently *Never Alone*. There's an insinuation that just like Cherokee culture is viewed as something that lives in the past, the only thing that Indigenous thought might be able to expand our understanding of is mention of Indigenous peoples. Meanwhile there's a persistent belief that work like mine, like that of other Indigenous scholars, must conform to the traditions of the academy. This book is my declaration that there's another way to see these scenarios, that it is possible that Indigenous thought and ways of seeing/knowing can inform non-Indigenous games and non-Indigenous players. The mere prevalence of Greek-rooted Western rhetoric, descending from Aristotle, doesn't cement that it is the best and only way to think about our world. In fact, as the world grows more diverse and more globally connected, it

will be more and more important to *actually* consider other voices and other ways of seeing.

I'm typically the only Cherokee in most game studies discussions I enter (I am not the only one, but you can count us with your fingers). I am one of only two Native American faculty at my current university. I am the only non-white scholar in my entire program. My voice is not the typical voice in my field, by any means. I will never claim I am "better" or that my methods deserve more attention than others, but I will defiantly proclaim my *right to exist*, for my theories to exist. Game studies needs to think about how non-white people see and interact with games. And not just games that try to consider diversity, like *Never Alone* (though *Never Alone* is critically important), but in all games from tabletop niche products to Triple-A titles like *WoW* or *Halo*.

These are stories that need to be told, need to be heard.

### AT THE SAME TIME

Having just lobbied for the importance of the methods of this book, I also want to reiterate something else that is critical for Indigenous scholars and other scholars of difference. I am not every Indigenous person. I do not speak for everyone. I'm not every Cherokee. The paradoxical element of the positionality of Indigenous methods in 2017 is that while we must fight for our right to exist and to hollow out our own space, we also must remind those in the tradition that we aren't homogenous. I don't want to represent all Indigenous people, and I don't want to claim this is THE Indigenous way to look at video gaming identities and groups. I represent a different way to look at game studies, identity, and rhetoric. I don't speak for everyone red.

### THIS WAY OF SEEING

As I look toward my own further research, and I think about what the field can take from this study, the following five key points emerge:

1. The consideration of digital game identities as stories allows for a new, more nuanced understanding of the work that gamers are doing and the nature of what gamers create. Character creation isn't rooted in the visual traditions that game creation tools might indicate, nor are the interactions of gamers in game

space under-developed or overly casual. Gamers are doing interesting work, and their exchanges in game bear a strong similarity to how Indigenous stories build identity and histories.

2. There is a group identity for gamers—and likely for other collaborative groups—that finds its root in the necessity to have help and the desire to do similar things but evolves into something far more, into a mutually authored story. This creates agency for the collective but also asks for individual concessions. As online gaming evolves, this will become more and more of a common understanding of how gamer groups work.
3. The ability of a gamer to build a robust digital identity depends on Kairos. Timing, written large and considered on a micro level, is truly everything, just as it is in any good story. This is further influenced by the way time works in a game space (a magic circle) like *WoW*, where various moments can be relived and re-iterated even as the larger narrative marches onward.
4. Digital identities matter. I know I'm not the first person to articulate that point, but as these story-based accounts illustrate, there are ways that digital identities matter that we haven't fully explored yet. How do issues of gender, of race, and of class operate when they're visually obscured but seep out through actions and discourse? How do we understand race in a space that so many consider to be beyond or outside of race and gender?
5. It is only through seeing the narrative conflicts in storytelling that we can discover the common narrative that links online groups and allows for cultivation of digital identities that cohere and last. Be the conflicts interpersonal like Lint and Sally or with group goals like with *TheBearTank*, those conflicts define the narrative of the collaborative stories by illustrating to us clearly what doesn't fit the narrative. While again, this might seem obvious, I suggest here that if a collaborative digital project or space is viewed as a story it is easier to read the incongruent pieces and hence better understand what needs to change or evolve.

My next project, proceeding from this exploration, is to determine what else can happen if difference is allowed to flourish in gaming. I have set the foundations for a study of how many people from outside the power structure manage to climb the ladder in game production and design, how non-dominant cultures shape game design, mechanics, and character design, and what a new perspective could provide to game design as a discipline.

## I END WITH A STORY

*Late one evening, after raiding, I find myself standing in the middle of the Orc capital city of Orgrimmar, staring intently at a battle dummy. Flash-point's night resulted in me adding to my collection a massive axe with incredible statistics, but for the previous two months I'd been operating as dual wield, using a short sword in each hand. I'd reset my spec, adjusted all of my armor and spells, and stepped to the dummy to see what my new weapon could do. My goal was to break the usual 10K damage-per-second I averaged with my two swords. The build starts slow, but about a minute in, the stats ramp, and I'm sitting at just over 12,000. That's when I notice a message in chat.*

*"How'd you do that?"*

*Someone else was watching the dummy, scrutinizing how much damage I'd done.*

*"I'm not sure I can do it again. I'm tinkering with this new weapon . . ."*

*I try again. Same results. A third time. Same results.*

*"What's the secret?"*

*I spend the next few minutes explaining my attack order to this other player, also a Death Knight. I tell him to check the forums at [ElitistJerks.com](http://ElitistJerks.com) and to do armory checks on the players he saw doing well. I offer him some thoughts on stacking mastery vs. stacking plus hit. As I mentioned how I sometimes watch people's cast speed, he said "hold on, I'm taking notes!"*

*Wait. Taking notes? I wish my students said "hold on!"*

*"Hey, let me tell you a story . . ."*

## Notes

1. I say “typically” here because the case can easily be made that this isn’t a universal trait. Many argue, for example, that the *Legend of Zelda* games are RPGs, but Link, the game’s protagonist, doesn’t level up in the traditional sense and doesn’t have any sort of class or skill tree that is apparent to players.

2. This is one of many places where Chen was writing up the same ideas as I was completing my research. Our views are so similar that I feel remiss not citing him, but I didn’t have the benefit of reading his work until I was well into my own revision process.

3. In the Vanilla version of *WoW* there were also forty-person raids, but those were not present during my research.

4. This isn’t as true now as it was when I started this project. I stand behind the fact as a foundational part of what shaped my research, though the claim doesn’t hold up as well now. This is a good thing for the field.

5. I reference here Cushman’s reflection on reciprocity and the model she offers in *The Struggle and the Tools*. While her study itself doesn’t give back in the ways she might have hoped, she contributed support to her participants in ways that she could, offering rides to places, helping with paperwork, etc. In that spirit, I contributed all I could to the guild I researched, as I felt it was critical that I, at the very least, play as well as the player who would have been in the group were I not there.

6. I know that many scholars might find it problematic to equate narrative and storytelling, but “storytelling” in the Cherokee sense is a practice that is what writing studies could call a narrative. The two aren’t precisely equal, but the similarities across the two terms are such that presenting them as roughly similar will help to differentiate a storytelling tradition from “telling a story.”

7. Numerous people have argued that the magic circle isn’t a clean break from the real world. I do not disagree with that idea, but from an Indigenous perspective, that was obvious from the moment we used the term *magic circle*. As such, it’s a challenge that I don’t feel invalidates my use of Huizinga’s work.

8. To continue my metaphor, this is not to suggest that gamers are so selfish that one might not be happy with unlimited soup, salad, bread sticks, and a raid that kills the Lich King if that’s the compromise the group is making

that particular day to please someone who needs to kill the breadsticks . . . er . . . Lich King. I've abstracted it here to try to illustrate how that person might feel trying, every week, to go to Outback Steakhouse only to end up at the Olive Garden. It's surprising how often raiders, even just from the ones I talked to in this study, will stagnate with a group doing things they don't want to do, all the while hating it and doing a poor job. It breaks the narrative of their in-game identity to the point that they're barely functional, yet they stay in the group.

9. One of the other reasons I chose to utilize identity tourism as a lens is because at the outset I hoped there might be, in my study data, more gender, sexuality, and race-related information to marry with my other hypotheses. Unfortunately, I did not find enough of that sort of diversity-related information for it to be a major factor in my data analysis. The players in my study all play toons that are of their respective gender (the four males, and myself, play male toons, the female participants were both female toons), and while one participant is self-identified as Chicana, one is self-identified as Mexican-American, and I myself am mixed-blood Cherokee, our racial identities do not appear in the research data in any significant or meaningful ways. The fact that there wasn't anything major in terms of discoveries, in spite of racial diversity among the members of my small sample, was perhaps unfortunate but leaves me with a rich area to move into with my next research project(s).

10. Each of the participants in the study had witnessed at least one similar guild split before in their previous raiding experiences.

11. Sally professed to have created the guild for a specific, personal reason: her boyfriend, who was quite good at the game, would not (or could not—she never shared why) speak to people, but he wanted to raid. Sally wanted to make sure he had a place to raid and the ability to obtain gear. Here was someone—in the boyfriend—who would consider himself a bleeding-edge raider and who regularly dominated DPS charts, who was unable or unwilling to communicate with people, and sitting in the room with him, wearing her headset and chatting almost constantly, was his girlfriend, managing a guild and gathering people so the couple could participate in raids.

12. While raid leader is a socially constructed phenomenon, it was universal across my research sample: every player I spoke to, in every raid each of them had participated in, expressed that there was clearly a raid leader in their groups, even in PUG groups where the person might have only been the raid leader for that one night. It was also universal across my sample that raid leaders—though not guild masters—were never questioned or over-ruled by a guild leader or anyone else, other than in moments of trolling or intense player rage.

13. Just an aside for readers who might not have a sense of how intense this is: I only raid led once in all my time researching—as a favor to Lint—and it was incredibly stressful compared to just playing, having to account

for the other nine people and insure they knew what to do. That aside, the five-night raid week, which we ran then and also near the end of my research when the Firelands tier of raiding debuted, is every bit as exhausting as working a part-time job. The first week of Firelands, Flashpoint clocked forty-three hours of raid time, and it had an impact on my day-to-day life. I was exhausted from game research. For Sally to just volunteer Lint for twice the work, then, is no small thing. This was a major issue.

14. Gkick stands for “guild kick”—gkick is literally the command plugged in to remove someone from the guild.

15. Based on all of my logged research, no one was. I don’t know what anyone but I said to Sally privately, though, so there’s a slight possibility this was real. I think Sally would have mentioned it to me, though, as she was, as you’ll see in just a few pages, super open about everything that was going on.

16. I would find out later, though I did not tell Lint, that this was a lie. Sally used her boyfriend in several situations as a scapegoat. It was her own displeasure with Iceman that caused her to not want him in the group, and she told me at least once that her boyfriend, in fact, “liked” all of the people in the guild. While this seems like a moment where some discussion could be made of gender roles and gender-based decisions, after the group split Sally ended up being someone I only spoke to twice via email to collect some of my study responses or to randomly check in on because of my concern for her mother, so I will leave this as an important issue to be addressed in another study. I do not wish to overshadow the months of research I did with Flashpoint by placing too much emphasis on the reactions of a person who was on the opposing side of the guild split and only part of my research for one month, but I do recognize that for many readers, Sally likely raises questions; I plan to address gender issues more specifically in my follow-up study.

17. Again, this read to me, as a researcher, as a major red flag. Had she not told me later that this was a lie, I would have considered a potentially aggressive/abusive relationship to be something that : (a) needed to be accounted for in the research and (b) might have been an uncomfortable area of research. Since it turned out to be a lie, I have decided to leave discussion of the gender issues simply in this footnote: had it been real, this would have been a sad commentary on that particular relationship, and relationships like that—in gaming and otherwise—are deserving of more research consideration by our field (not to mention intervention by people who can offer help and protection should it elevate beyond “I do what he tells me”).

18. Remember, dear reader, that I was with Lint and Salty, along with Sally and Teddy, in TheSkullz, with Iceman joining us as an outsider, when we learned that encounter.



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Dr. Phillip Michael Alexander is Assistant Professor of Games in the Armstrong Institute of Interactive Media Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. A native of the Midwest and a mixed-blood Cherokee, Alexander's work has appeared in *Kairos*, *Computers & Composition*, and in various edited collections, including *Play/Write: Digital Rhetoric, Writing and Games* and *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*. Alexander is the co-director of the Miami University Varsity Esports Program, the first Division One Varsity Esports Program in the world. Alexander is also partnered with Twitch.TV to offer courses on video game streaming and the history and culture of Esports.

IDENTITY AND COLLABORATION IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* tells the story of what happens when a Cherokee gamer, using a storyteller's perspective and a methodology built from equal parts Indigenous tradition and current academic field knowledge, spends a year in what was at-the-time the largest online video game in the world. Following from work by James Paul Gee and Bonnie Nardi, Phillip Michael Alexander ventured forth into the game world to see what someone who was a gamer long before he was an academic might see in this same fascinating virtual space. In working with, playing with, and sharing the stories of a ten-person "raid" group—players performing at the highest level within the game—he set out to determine how those gamers most invested in success built identities and communities. The resulting work is a reader-friendly, theory informed, virtual-boots-on-the-virtual-ground look at how gamers craft in-game identities, find like-minded gamers to form group identities, then organize to do staggering amounts of work in a virtual world. For anyone who ever wondered what the appeal of *World of Warcraft* is, Phillip Michael Alexander illustrates how some of the most active, most engaged, and most talented players spend their time in that virtual world.

PHILLIP MICHAEL ALEXANDER is Assistant Professor of Games in the Armstrong Institute of Interactive Media Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. A native of the Midwest and a mixed-blood Cherokee, Alexander's work has appeared in *Kairos*, *Computers & Composition*, and in various edited collections including *Play/Write: Digital Rhetoric, Writing and Games* and *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*.

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