

“I hope your mom gets cancer and dies!»

An anthropological study of sociality within virtual worlds



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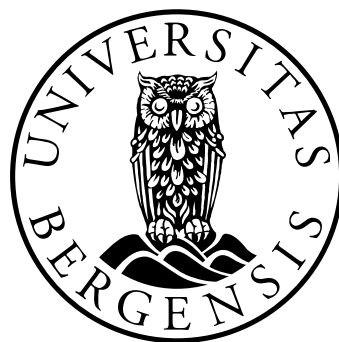


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Abstract

Virtual worlds serve as new digital spaces in which humans interact with each other but also with the machines and mechanics on which the virtual worlds are built, creating new frameworks for sociality. By questioning how new players are welcomed in virtual world, this thesis aims to address the more all-encompassing question of whether or not virtual worlds are legitimate places of research, or if the sociality found in them are simply reproductions of real life constructed by game developers. While the study of virtual worlds has been around for quite a while, the specific study of sociality within virtual worlds is still in its early stages, leaving the topic of new gamers within virtual worlds seemingly untouched in previous studies. The findings presented in this thesis will give an overview of how some aspects of being new to a virtual world may be explained with anthropological theories of social structure and relations, the resistance of power, rituals and reciprocity. These topics have been explored within the online game Guild Wars 2 using participant observation, and semi-structured and informal interviews, as well as a research guild specifically created to get past the official account given by the general gamer population. Although a small contribution to the anthropological field of virtual worlds, this thesis suggests that virtual worlds are places worth studying considering the societies found within them are more impacted by the gamers who inhabit them than by the digital structure on which they are built.

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The Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen deserves a big thank you for allowing me to study virtual worlds despite it being a new area of research for the department. I hope I will not be the last student to do so.

Additionally, the insights and suggestions of Professor Kristine Jørgensen at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies and her research group Games and Transgressive Aesthetics have been invaluable.

A big thank you to my friends and family who have supported me and believed in me all the way through. A special thanks to my husband who not only has brought me coffee when I needed to stake awake and green tea when he considered it to be past my bedtime, but who also has contributed directly to this thesis by sharing his insights from other virtual worlds. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my brother, Daniel Lid, for making me feel like the coolest big sister ever.

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Glossary

Boss: A foe, usually the main objective of dynamic events, personal story chapters or dungeons.

Commander: A player who has unlocked the commander tool enabling him to manage large groups of players on a temporary basis. See “squad”.

Dungeon: Smaller instances of the game where multiple players need to cooperate. Players are separate from other players for the duration of the dungeon.

Guild: a group of people who play together. Guilds have their own dialogue window within the game. Guild have the opportunity of completing weekly guild missions (or guild rushes), in order for the guild to get certain advantages as a reward. Some guilds are cross game. Meaning the same guild play different games together. These typically have their own website/member site and switch games according to interest but also whenever new expansions etc. are released.

Home world: See “world”.

Ingame: all actions that take place within the game. The contrasting term would be “irl” or “real-life”.

Instance: A part of the game separate to the open world (see “open world”), typically containing specific activities such as dungeons, mini-PvPs and personal story chapters.

IRL “In real life”. Life outside of the game.

Mentor: A player who has unlocked the mentor skill enabling him to indicate the location of events and group activities by temporarily showing up as a red “mentor tag” on the map to all other players, as well as having a mentor tag above his characters’ head.

MMORPG: Massive(ly) multiplayer online role-playing game.

Newb: a newbie, someone who is new to the game itself or to gaming as such. Used as a descriptive word about someone. Not considered an insult. Not commonly used in game chat.

Noob: a newbie, someone who is new to the game itself or to gaming as such, or someone who does something wrong either in terms of what is expected from a player, or in terms of ruining something for a group. Often considered as an insult if used about someone.

NPC: Non-player character.

Open world: refers to the PvE part of the game except for dungeons, personal story chapters and other instanced (see “instance”) activities.

Party: A temporary group of up to 5 players. A party has its own party chat, but no dialogue window or own challenges or rewards unlike guilds.

PvE: Player versus environment. Gameplay against the game itself rather than other players.

PvP: Player versus player. The term is used as a catchall for Structural PvP, WvW as well as some smaller activities where the players have each other as enemies instead of NPCs.

Raid: A separate challenge for groups of ten. Similar to dungeons but not as short in form. Typically played by guild mates. The entrance to a raid instance is called a raid wing.

Raid wing: See “raid”.

Structural PvP: Competitive play between players.

Squad: A temporary group of players similar to parties. Squads may have up to 10 players in them, or 50 if the squad is created by a commander.

Tyria: Refers to both the world of Tyria and the continent. If residing in *Divinity's Reach* (the human capital), one's region would be Kryta, the continent Tyria in the world Tyria.

World: Refers to both the geographical concept as described above, but also the game technical concept: A world is a group of players that automatically team up when engaging in WvW. All players choose a "home world" or server when starting the game. Outside of WvW this only affects the game in that there are home worlds with specific languages other than English. The chat will therefore be in German if playing on a German home world etc.

World boss: Special event bosses (see "boss") that are spawned on specific places within the open world (see "open world") on a set schedule.

WvW: World versus World. Big events where big groups of players from the same "home world" play against each other.

XP: Experience points. The most common reward for completing tasks, events, etc.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Guild Wars 2 is a Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) developed by ArenaNet and published by the Korean NCSoft in 2012. In September 2017 they counted 11 million players¹ who have been playing the game in the five years it had existed. Within the game, players are immersed in a mythical fantasy world where centaurs, basilisks, giants, trolls, griffons, dragons, ghosts and demons etc inhabit the world of *Tyria* along with the five playable races *Asura*, *Charr*, *Humans*, *Norn* and *Sylvari*. The game may be played in a number of ways, but all player-created characters have their own storyline which is influenced by the players choices along the way. Additionally, Guild Wars 2 is a highly social game where players often interact with each other. Players also form *guilds*, which are groups of players who have chosen to cooperate with each other in a more formal way. Guilds are typically highly hierarchic, and new players are often added only after one of the guild leaders has approved the new member. New players are called *noobs* or *newbs*, which I will further explain later on. The game caters to three geographical regions in the actual world: North America, Europe and China. While the Chinese version is specifically for Chinese players, players from outside of Europe and North-America may join the European and North-American versions without limitations. Europeans may also play on North-American servers and vice versa.

Background

In 2009, Bonnie Nardi published her findings from her fieldwork in the online game *World of Warcraft (WoW)* through a book she named *My Life As A Night Elf Priest*. Through it, she gave an account of WoW from an anthropological perspective, and although her main objective was far from it, my interest after reading her book was with the social diversity she described as being characteristic to the game. This, along with a personal experience quite different to that of Nardi, sparked my interest in the topic “new players in online games”, and acts as the foundation for this thesis.

To my knowledge there are no previous studies on this specific theme, although there is anthropological work on online games, or rather ‘virtual worlds’. Along with Nardi’s

¹ <https://www.guildwars2.com/en/news/the-path-to-the-desert-in-numbers/>

description of *WoW* (2009), Thomas Boellstorff's account of *Second Life*² (2008), Celia Pearce's fieldwork experience in *There.com* and *Uru: Myst Online* (2009), as well as T.L. Taylor's studies of *Everquest* and *WoW* (2006), make out what can best be described as "the classics" within the social anthropology of virtual worlds. In addition to their work as individual researchers, they have also cooperated on a book that has served me well before, during and after my fieldwork: *Ethnography and virtual worlds; a handbook of method* (Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012). Their suggestions and experience on how to properly study virtual worlds ethnographically, as well as their insights into previous studies of virtual worlds spanning over such different topics as "identity construction, ethnicity and race, gender, embodiment, and the forging of community through narrative, speech, and social action" as well as how "design and governance of virtual worlds inform the socialities within them" and "governance and intellectual property, learning and mentorship, and relations" have been fundamental for my thesis, both during fieldwork and in the analysis of my findings. Although much research has been done on virtual worlds, the study of relationships and the forming of such within virtual worlds is rather new and still has some shortcomings especially regarding how non-gamers become gamers and how sociality is produced and reproduced within virtual worlds. Considering my own (partial) inexperience regarding virtual worlds, the topic of new players within virtual worlds seemed like a fitting theme for my thesis.

Project objectives

The main objective for this study is to give an overview of and discuss how social relations are formed within virtual worlds. My "field site" will be the online game *Guild Wars 2*. Included in the analysis of my findings, are virtual world findings from researchers such as Tom Boellstorff (Boellstorff 2008), Denise Carter (2005), Gray Gaffam (Wesch and Whitehead 2012), Henrietta Moore (Moore 2013), and Bonnie Nardi (Nardi 2009), among others. Still, the majority of my analysis will be rooted within classical anthropological theories of social structure and relations (Paine 1969), resistance of power (Scott 1985), rituals (Turner 1969) and reciprocity (Mauss 1990 [1950]). Through this I hope to illustrate

² *Coming Of Age In Second Life* is exclusively based on inworld fieldwork, which makes it the first anthropological study to only take place in the digital world.

how virtual world sociality may be an extension, although somewhat dissimilar, of the sociality found in the actual world.

Additionally, my thesis also serves as an exploratory analysis of how anthropological research may be conducted in virtual worlds, drawing both on the handbook mentioned above, but also on theories of the anthropological method in general (Bernard 1994, Gottlieb and Graham 1994, Jenkins 1994, Hastrup 1995, Borchgrevink 2003, Bernard 2011).

Problem/questions

My initial research question was "how are new players welcomed in virtual worlds?" During the fieldwork itself, several other interesting topics emerged, but overall, this question seemed to be a good starting point. Along with my main question, I also used a list of other, related, questions to drive the fieldwork in the right direction.

- How can "noobs" be defined? ³
- When does a noob become a player or even a gamer?
- What is difficult about being new in a digital world?
- What is difficult about playing with "noobs"?
- How can being a new player or a new guild⁴ member be compared to being new in offline environments? How are the experiences different? How are they alike?

After some time in the field, several other questions emerged:

- How do new players form their avatar⁵?
- How do experienced players form their avatar?
- Why do some players interact on a high level with a high number of other players, while other players are perfectly happy playing with only a select few or even with no explicit communication at all?

³ *Noob* is an emic term describing a new player. I go into further detail about this term in chapter 4.

⁴ *Guilds* are groups of players formed by the players in order to better cooperate. Guilds will be further explained later on.

⁵ The *avatar* is the virtual representation of the player within the game. I will give a more detailed explanation of avatars in chapter 2, and will further discuss them in chapter 5.

- Does the choice of *race*⁶ influence chat discourse? If so: why and how?
- Can “noobs” be defined as just one thing? Is the alternating term “newbs” enough to define all aspects about being a “noob”?

Although I was unable to answer all of these questions during my 6-month fieldwork, they may serve as suggestions as to what could at some point be studied within this field. During my time in Guild Wars 2, I concentrated on the aspect of the new player and how he forms relations, how he advances in the game and how he understands his position within the social structures of the game and that of the game culture.

Analytical limitations

My initial research questions brought with them some limitations in terms of what aspects of the game I was able to focus on, but additional analytical limitations are necessary. Although the study of gaming and online gaming has grown in popularity over the last three decades, studies on Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) in particular are few, at least within the anthropological genre. On the other hand, a study of “gaming” or even “online gaming” would have been too broad in order to properly compare my findings to those of other studies. Rather, I have chosen to make use of the term “virtual world” and the definition of Boellstorff et.al. (Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012):

First, they are *places* and have a sense of *worldness*. They are not just spatial representations but offer an object-rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact. Second, virtual worlds are multi-user in nature; they exist as shared social environments with synchronous communication and interaction. While participants may engage in solitary activities within them, virtual worlds thrive through co-inhabitation with others. Third, they are *persistent*: they continue to exist in some form even as participants log off. They can thus change while any one participant is absent, based on the platform itself or the activities of other participants. Fourth, virtual worlds allow participants to *embody* themselves, usually as avatars (even if “textual avatars,” as in text-only virtual worlds such as MUDs [Multi User

⁶ *Race* refers to the five different types of avatars one may choose from while playing Guild Wars 2. They will be further explained in chapter 2.

Dungeons]), such that they can explore and participate in the virtual world [original emphasis] (Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012:7).

Although “virtual worlds” here refers to places of sociality and play using modern digital technologies such as computers, tablets and smart phones, it is important to note that the virtual is *not* new, neither is it limited to the digital technologies (Moore 2011). While the term is rather lacking in this respect, I choose to employ it despite its obvious shortcomings, simply because I have not been able to identify another term that covers its definition *and* its shortcomings in a satisfactory way.

Methodology

My research has consisted of participant observation as well as interviews both in-world⁷ and face-to-face with different players in real-world encounters. My intention was to follow Boellstorff’s example of only doing in-world fieldwork (Boellstorff 2008); he was the first anthropologist to adopt this methodology. While his reason was more of an academic curiosity, my reason for wanting to do so was to acknowledge the field site as a legitimate place of social relations, independent of the outside world. Despite my intentions, some interviews were conducted face to face with players. Still, these were only with players that I did not interact with within the game, but rather met through offline activities⁸.

Despite the fact that all players use avatar names within the games, I have chosen to anonymize all names both of characters and guilds. The only exception is my main character’s name, Lani Medusa, my account name, Antronewb, as well as the guild I created for research purposes, Antronewb’s Research Guild. I will discuss these and other ethical issues as well as details of my methodological choices in chapter three.

Significance

By studying a rudimentary aspect of sociality and how this looks in virtual worlds, I hope to participate in the debate about whether Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

⁷ *In-world* refers to anything found within the game rather than outside of it. The contrasting term *in real life (irl)* is also commonly used.

⁸ However, I did end up playing with an acquaintance of mine who happened to be already playing the game. Also, my brother and my husband joined me for the occasional gaming evening even though they previously did not play GW2.

(MMORPGs) are social and cultural contexts worth exploring and studying. Although a small contribution, my thesis may shed some light on how some classical anthropological findings take their place in an online context. It also questions how these virtual worlds should be studied and whether we have the appropriate analytical terms to discuss them properly.

Chapter 2: The Fieldsite

Choosing the fieldsite

Choosing a MMORPG for my study was quite hard. There are a lot of games on the market and navigating them without any prior knowledge of this universe was not an easy task. I had a few criteria when first starting my search:

- I wanted the game to have relatively stable guilds, so that participation in them could be fruitful in terms of getting to know both people, habits and the overall feeling of the guild culture
- The game had to be relatively new or have something about it that specifically attracted new players, since my overall topic would revolve around noobs
- The game could not be just released, as my topic of choice depended on a distinction between noobs and non-noobs

I shared these criteria with other students, professors and researchers at the University of Bergen, and soon enough, the idea of doing fieldwork within Guild Wars 2 was presented to me by Professor at the Department of Informational Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen, Kristine Jørgensen and the cross disciplinary research group she manages: Games and Transgressive Aesthetics. I had never before heard of the game (nor of the original Guild Wars), but after a short period of research I found that Guild Wars 2 seemed perfect:

- It had existed long enough to have regular players in stable guilds
- The first major expansion to the game was about to be released, attracting both new players and those who previously played the game, but had lost interest
- It had been released three years prior to my research, and was based on another, similar game, meaning that regular players of the original game were likely to keep playing the new game, giving me another level when “ranking” players from noob to expert

Before going into detail about how I started my fieldwork, I will give an overview of the most important aspects of the game, so that the reader may understand the context and have a certain understanding of the game itself.

The rules and fiction of the game

As in all other games, playing Guild Wars 2 entails relating to the rules of the game as well as the rules of play. Jesper Juul (2005) has argued that video games are both rules and fiction, and although I cannot speak for all video games, this is certainly true for GW2. One may distinguish between character specific rules, rules concerning the game environment, but also the players' own intention of how to play, and thus the rules of play constructed by the players themselves. In addition, the game tells a story about an alternate world in which the peoples (or *races*) have rich histories, customs, friends and enemies. This aspect also rules game play in so far that it influences the players to think and act in an “as if” way when encountering the characters of other players, non-player characters (NPCs) and the environment as such.

Character specific rules

Races

When starting the game for the first time, one will have to choose a character based on one of five different playable *races*: asura, charr, human, norn or sylvari. These races all have their specific *regions*⁹ in the game, as well as a rich *race* specific history. The *races* differ in a number of ways, both in size, walking style, how they talk or what kinds of sounds they make, but also in the way they relate to both playable and NPC-*races* throughout the game. Since each *race* has its own *region*, choosing a specific *race* also means choosing a specific *region* to start playing in. A lot of time is spent in ones “home region”, especially the first 15 levels of playing.

⁹ Regions are specific parts of the map that belong to or are associated with a specific race, resembling countries. Some of the regions belong to NPC-races.

Figure 1: Asura



Figure 2: Charr



Figure 3: Human



Figure 4: Norn



Figure 5: Sylvari



Professions

After choosing a race, one chooses the *gender* of the character (male or female)¹⁰ and the *profession*, before customizing the appearance of the character. There are nine *professions* available, sorted into three categories: Soldiers (Guardians, Revenants and Warriors), Adventurers (Engineers, Rangers and Thiefs), and Scholars (Elementalists, Mesmers and Necromancers). All professions have different abilities and different available *weapons* and *skills*. The main difference between soldiers, adventurers and scholars, however lies in how the avatar fights and what kind of armour is available. The differences range from the heavy armoured, close-up combating soldiers (equipped with swords, sledgehammers etc.), via the medium armour wearing, mid-range combating adventurers (using for example longbows or firearms to fight), to the light armoured scholars who mostly use what can best be described as “magic” to fight. Both genders and all races have the full range of options between

¹⁰ The topic of avatar gender will be further explored in chapter 6.

professions. There is one limit though: only players who have purchased the *Heart of Thorns*¹¹ expansion of the game have the option of choosing the revenant profession. My main character during fieldwork was a female human guardian I named Lani Medusa. I also tried out playing with a charr avatar with the ranger profession, as well as a norm elemental and a sylvari thief. The main part of my fieldwork however, was spent in the form of Lani Medusa.

Figure 6: Lani Medusa



¹¹ The Guild Wars 2 base game is free to download and free to play, but players may purchase expansion packs that give access to further storylines after completion of the main storyline of the base game. In addition, purchasing expansion packs also allow players to create more than two characters, which is what is included in the base game version. This may also be done by purchasing character “slots” with [gems](#).

Biographical options

Once the previous steps are complete, one also has to answer or rather decide on three biographical questions. These are themed around profession, personality and race, and determine how the “Personal Story”-part of the game will be formed, and also how NPC’s will interact with the character in the game. Lastly, the character needs a name. This has to be unique to the character.

The build: Skills, attributes and other game mechanics

Depending on the choice of profession, one has a variety of *weapons* to choose from. Each type of *weapon* comes with a set of core *skills*. As weapons are interchangeable, one may try out different kinds of weapons/skills. Some may turn out to be more effective than others even if they in theory deal the same amount of damage.

As an example, my most played character throughout the fieldwork was a guardian. Guardians engage in close-up battle. This means having a weapon such as a sword, shield, great sword (my personal favourite), hammer, staff, longbow, sceptre, mace or torch to fight with. My first weapon when starting the game was a great sword, and this became my favourite throughout the game, even though I tried out every other option too. When using a skill, one must wait a certain time before using the same skill again. Different skills with a certain weapon also deal different kinds of damage. This makes combat a highly strategic art. Switching between weapons and/or skills means switching between different strategies, which is not always easy. Since different skills are “activated” (for lack of a better word) with the numeric keys from 1 through 9 on the keyboard, the use of a weapon quickly gets internalized in the sense that the body knows which keys to press to get the desired outcome. Once a new weapon is equipped, though, the same keys have different results. Even though the character on the screen clearly wears another weapon, the player still only has his/her keyboard to fight with. This makes tasks where everyone is given the same weapon especially difficult, because no one is familiar with the weapon or the skills that they are currently using.¹² Within Guild

¹² This is a common way for the game to work against its own players. In other games this may be a limited view of the screen, music or other sounds that are deliberately interfering with gameplay or other factors making gameplay more difficult and often drastically different than what the player is used to.

Wars 2, this happens in some dynamic events, renown hearts, dungeons, guild-events and Player versus Player (PvP)- and World versus World (WvW)-instances.¹³

Attributes (such as power, precision, toughness, vitality, etc) affect the effectiveness of the chosen weapon. There are 15 core attributes which all characters have, as well as one additional profession specific attribute. Attributes are strengthened or weakened depending on one's equipment such as armour and weapon. In PvE and WvW *consumables*¹⁴ may also do this. Upon starting the game, all attributes have the same value for all players. The exception is the attribute *Health*, which is profession specific (heavy armoured professions will have more health points than professions with soft armour).

In addition to skills and attributes, *specializations* and *traits* highly influence the effectiveness of battle. Specializations may be trained using *hero points* (points given upon the successful completion of hero challenges, as well as when levelling up ones' character), and give access to different *traits*. Specializations are specific to certain weapons, and so the traits associated with them unlock new skills in addition to the core skills that come with a certain weapon. The combination of weapon and armour (and thereby a characters' attributes), specialization and traits, make up what is called the *build* of the character. Considering how many factors the *build* encompasses, the choices made by the player regarding the build is what makes each character unique.

Health stats and downed state

Health points are one of the attributes mentioned above. They are deducted whenever a foe deals damage to ones' character. When the health points reach zero, the character enters a "downed" state. When downed, other players may heal you, and you have four "downed skills" available to try and rescue yourself. If one fails, one dies, and must select a waypoint¹⁵ at which to start over. Different professions start with a different number of health points.

For each time the character dies, its armour is also severely damaged. As the symbol for armour damage shows as a small orange shield immediately left of the health status area, this was not something I was aware of, before suddenly finding my character half naked, only

¹³ These different kinds of quests and game modes will be explained below.

¹⁴ Consumables may be food or drinks that the character can consume and that give a temporary effect on ones attributes and/or skills.

¹⁵ Waypoints are specific places where one may teleport to from anywhere in the game. See below.

wearing underwear in a high traffic area. Although no comments in the chat were aimed at me for this reason, the feeling of being practically naked (only still wearing a helmet) was quite embarrassing at the time. My feeling of embarrassment stemmed not only from “being” naked, but also from the realization that in order to become that way, I must have had repeatedly failed during combat. However, my embarrassment vanished rather quickly as soon as I realized that a lot of the characters running around in the game were typically female humans with scholar professions. In short: most of the characters were already half naked because of their armour. Because my character had the guardian profession, who wear heavy armour, the difference was very clear to me. To other players, however, my character seemed to be just another half-naked female human.

Environment specific rules

Zones

The world of Guild Wars 2, Tyria, is quite complex, and few players seem to have full knowledge of how all its parts connects with each other. What everyone who has played the game for more than a couple of minutes knows though, is that the map is parted into zones. A zone is sometimes also called *a map* or *an explorable zone*. Zones are level specific, meaning that if a zone is labelled level 1 to 15, the challenges, missions and events within that zone will always be on those levels. Exploration or completion of everything within a zone (except hero challenges) will be rewarded with experience points (XP). Experience points are required to level up ones’ character and is displayed as a yellow line on the bottom of the screen (see figure 8).

Map completion (completing all the quests in a given zone and finding all points of interests etc) is also rewarded with XP. Once one zone is fully explored, another one awaits. Connecting zones and cities make up a so-called region. In figure 7 Kryta is the region, while Queensdale, Kessex Hills and Gendarran Fields are zones. Divinity’s Reach is a city.

Figure 7: Map of Kryta



All regions are visible on the map of Tyria, but not all will be accessible to the player before finding an asura gate (see below) to cross from one zone to another. Each zone features a list of things for the player to explore:

Waypoints

Waypoints are points on the map to which one can travel to from anywhere. This works almost like teleporting, but only works for waypoints that are already explored by the player. I.e. one cannot travel to a waypoint without having travelled there "by foot" first. Traveling through waypoints costs *gold*, which will be explained further down. Traveling over long distances are more expensive than shorter ones.

Renown Hearts

These are the main *quests* within the Player versus Environment (PvE) part of the game. In short, non-playable characters (NPCs) all around the world of Tyria need help, and the way to advance in the game (both in the Personal Story¹⁶ and in order to level up¹⁷), is through

¹⁶ See page 21.

¹⁷ See page 22.

completing these quests. The tasks that are asked are many and varied, but include protecting villagers, herd cattle, defeat centaurs, take back occupied land, help asura (one of the *races*) with research, and so on. *Renown hearts* may be classified as small quests, taking about two to ten minutes to complete, and are sometimes part of bigger quests with similar small quests clustered together. Typically, most quests within a zone will be similar in terms of the how, with whom and why. The first week of playing the game, I rarely did anything else than killing basilisks and centaurs.

If attempting to complete a task on a higher level than recommended, but within a zone with the approximate appropriate level, the task might be difficult. Most of the time though, it only takes a few minutes to complete them, and the health of the character rarely suffers. Completing a *renown heart* will be rewarded not only with XP, but also with *karma points*¹⁸ and *gold*¹⁹. Upon completion, the NPC previously needing help will start selling karma goods.

Hero Challenges

Contrary to renown hearts, *hero challenges* tend to be just that: a challenge. Often multiple players are needed to complete them, even if one takes on a hero challenge on the recommended level. Hero challenges mostly come in two forms: An NPC boss one has to defeat, or a place one has to travel to that is difficult to find either because it is hidden on the map (secret entrance etc.) or because it is guarded by hostile NPC's.

Vistas

Another way to explore a zone is through vistas. Interaction with the vista (shown as a column of light) will start a short video clip of the camera panning across the nearby area. This way one can get a good overview of what is nearby. Because of this, vistas are typically high up in the area and must be reached through jumping from place to place. They may be classified as jumping puzzles.

¹⁸ *Karma points* are received after completing renown hearts and may be used to purchase equipment from NPC merchants.

¹⁹ *Gold* refers to the main currency within the game. This will be further addressed below.

Figure 8: Vista within the city Divinity's Reach



Points of interest

Each zone also has a number of *points of interests*. These are simply places on the map one has to travel to for them to be properly shown on the map, and the zone to be completed.

Cities

There are six *cities* in Tyria. One capital city for each race and the city of *Lion's Arch*. Cities do not offer renown hearts, hero challenges, or hostile NPC's to battle, nor do they have dynamic level adjustment. They still include several waypoints (which are free to travel by within the city), as well as points of interest and vistas. More importantly, parts of a characters *personal story* typically plays out in cities. In addition, this is where one will find crafting stations enabling the player to refine the crafting materials harvested by him elsewhere. On special occasions, dynamic events may occur. This is typically linked to an event outside of the game, such as a big holiday, the anniversary of the game etc. For example, during my third week of playing the game, it so happened to be the Chinese New Year. This was celebrated in Destiny's Reach (my character's home city) with a mini PvP-game. The mini-game eliminated the element of level from all players, gave every player a new set of skills, and sorted the participating players into a blue and a red team. The reward if

one's team would win, was festive, Chinese firecrackers and fireworks. As well as being my first time trying out PvP, it also served as the first time it felt like the pressure was on.

Asura gates

As mentioned, Asura gates connect all zones and cities through an “underground network of tunnels”. Most asura gates are found on the outer edges of zones and are connected to the zone immediately next to it. Unexplored zones can only be entered via asura gates until a waypoint within that zone is discovered.

Some asura gates connect places that are not next to each other. These are typically located within a city with some sort of connection (in terms of storyline or history) to another zone. Also, the main city of Lion's Arch has asura gates to all zones, cities and raid wings throughout the whole of Tyria.

Figure 9: Fort Marriner in Lion's Arch



Dynamic level adjustment

If playing in a lower level zone, the characters level will temporarily be adjusted to fit with the level of the zone. This dynamic level adjustment is an important part of the game since players of different levels have a more equal basis for exploring the world this way. This feature also goes the other way around when playing in World versus World (WvW) or Player versus Player (PvP) mode, in which all characters are given a temporary top level.

If one attempts to play in a zone above the level of one's character in Player versus Environment (PvE) though, one will quickly find that this is near impossible if playing alone. The level adjustment only works if playing in a lower level area. At one instance in my fieldwork, a player on level 34 entered a zone at the recommended levels from 60 to 70. The player was simply trying to get from A to B (A being a waypoint and B being the renown heart practically next to it), but seemed to be attacked by NPC's as soon as he moved²⁰. Time and time after, the character died, and started over at the same waypoint. At first no one seemed to mind, giving him no attention, not healing him when being downed, but after the fourth time, another player simply wrote "go home" in the chat. Another player responded with "hear, hear!" The fifth time he died, he never returned.

Play specific rules

PvE means Player versus Environment, and is the term for all parts of gameplay where the player interacts with the game environment (such as the previously mentioned renown hearts, hero challenges, vistas, but also dynamic events, dungeons etc.) rather than with each other, which would be the case in Player versus Player (PvP) and World versus World (WvW). Since most noobs start out with PvE, rather than jumping straight into PvP or WvW, this is where I focused my research. I will therefore leave out ways to play the game that experienced players may consider important ways to play. To cover them briefly however, these ways to play include, but are not limited to:

- PvP and WvW
- guild missions
- further exploration of the map
- "Living World" stories (there are currently three seasons available)
- expansion packs (*Heart of Thorns*, released October 2015 and *Path of Fire* released in September 2017)

Playing the game after reaching level 80, and thus finishing the main story of the game, is generally called "endgame content". Even though more game play options are available once

²⁰ Depending on the level of the map one is currently on relative to one's characters level, NPCs will react differently when passing by. If, for example, a character on level 50 enters a level 80 map, hostile NPCs will react faster than on a level 30 map. When playing on top level on a lower level map, one will often be able to outrun hostile NPCs before they are able to attack.

a player reaches this phase, they most often continue playing the game in a similar fashion as before reaching level 80. If a players' main objective before reaching level 80 was to build a successful guild, he will probably continue playing the same way after reaching level 80. Also, if a player is mostly interested in the story-part of the game, he will probably go straight for the Living World endgame content once reaching level 80. A players' style of play may therefore be said to form in the early stages of playing the game, since the base game includes several different ways to play, and the player may explore his own preferences while playing the base game. Below I will give a short overview of the most common ways to play PvE in the base game.

Main storyline and the personal story

While there are many options on the table when considering how one wants to play Guild Wars 2, the main storyline of the game revolves around trying to defeat the *Elder Dragons*. Depending on ones' choices regarding race and biographical options the storyline will be different. The main storyline is told through *dungeons* (see below) as well as through ones' personal story. The two story telling parts of the game are separate and do not influence each other. Ones' choices within a dungeon will, however, have consequences for future dungeons.

The personal story of each character will differ depending on the choices made in the character creation part of the game. In short however, the personal story is what brings your character from level 1 to level 80 within the main storyline. At some levels, a new chapter of the personal story is unveiled, and new choices must be made. These choices actively affect gameplay later, as players will have to choose which other characters (NPC's that are important to the main story) to support, which group to join or which actions to take in tense situations, leading each player in different directions story wise. The main aim of the story is still the same for all characters: defeating the Elder Dragons of Orr. No matter which choices one has made throughout the personal story, at level 80 the storyline culminates in a battle against *Zhaitan*, one of the *Elder Dragons*. Including this last one, there are eight chapters to the personal story, divided into multiple quests at a time.

When playing a quest belonging to the personal story, one plays within an instance of the map. In short, this is a replica of a piece of the map where no other players are allowed in (unless they are in a "Party" with the person who is playing their personal story), and thus is a separate part of the game. If events occur within an instance, only the players who are already a part of that instance may take part. Personal story chapters are possible to do alone, but players may invite other players to join in order to ease the challenge.

Dungeons

Dungeons, like personal story chapters, are limited in length, open a separate instance of a part of the map, and are exclusive to the player who opened the instance and the players in his or her party. Often a specific dungeon has multiple “layers”, meaning that one dungeon can be played multiple times with different stories and tasks each time. One may attempt to do dungeons alone, but this is practically impossible. One simply has to cooperate with other players. This is sometimes done together with guild mates, and sometimes with complete strangers found in the “Looking for group” (LFG) function in the game.

Dynamic Events

While traveling through the world, minding one’s own business, one often comes across different types of events to activate and take part in (or ignore). These can be small events such as hero challenges to join, veteran hostiles (hostile NPCs that are more difficult to defeat than the average hostile NPC, typically titled “veteran”) of some sort, NPC’s that need help traveling from A to B, world bosses (massive hostiles also named “epic foes” that demand cooperation between players to defeat them) and so on and so on. Even though events can differ greatly, they have one thing in common: They are open for multiple players to take part in. Often, the events are aimed at only the players who happen to be near, other times, they can be planned bigger events that players anticipate and plan to join. Often though, if an event is in action and the players in the event need assistance, this will be asked for in the map chat so that more players may join in and help. Nearby players will also get a notification on their screen saying “ new event nearby”. While PvP and WvW –events are more competitive in terms of rewards for specific actions in a certain event; events in PvE are equally rewarded no matter how much a player participates. Everyone will get the same amount of gold, karma points and experience once the event is over.

Levelling up

Levelling up not only signifies to other players the characters’ experience within the game, but also is rewarded with *gold*, *hero points* and often *crafting materials* and other goods. It serves as a progression tracker for the first 80 levels (after which progression in the game is commonly tracked by completing challenges tied to map completion, number of kills etc), but also opens up more options regarding the build, enabling the player to equip his character with more powerful gear. In a sense this system works as a training period especially during the first fifteen levels before all major aspects of the game are unlocked. Later, even more

options are unlocked upon reaching certain levels. Levelling up within the first fifteen levels normally goes rather quickly. After that, one will typically need around an hour to level up²¹.

Buying, exchanging and creating goods

The main currency within Guild Wars 2 is *gold*. *Gold* here refers to coins which come in three denominations: Copper, silver and gold. One golden coin equals 100 silver coins, and one silver coin equals 100 copper coins. *Gold* is received by completing quests or selling goods but may also be purchased with *gems* which may be purchased with real money. *Gems* may also be used to purchase virtual items from the *Gem Store*. The *Gem Store* sells virtual products made by the game developers, differentiating it from the other marketplace within the game: *The Black Lion Trading Company*, which is the marketplace in which players trade all kinds of virtual objects. The most popular commodities are weapons and pieces of armour as well as *materials* and *ingredients* that may be used in *crafting* of *equipment* and *consumables*. Because one may initially only specialize in two types of crafting, players are only able to obtain specific types of equipment and consumables through trading, making the players interdependent.

The people who play Guild Wars 2, and how they play it

I have already established that GW2 is an MMORPG, but more importantly, it is a game designed to be social. Its predecessor required small groups of players with specific character traits for successful gaming, while in Guild Wars 2 ArenaNet have created a game specifically intended to encourage players to interact with each other in new ways. Although one does not need to join a guild to play the game, most players do so. As I will explain later though, the game itself opens for social interaction in a more flexible way, and for some players, this is enough. When starting my digital fieldwork one of the questions that emerged was whether this arena of play could be viewed as a society or a ‘culture’ of some kind, or whether it simply is a place of play and interaction without its own cultural context, but rather defined by the players’ own offline cultural contexts. I am still conflicted in this question, but for the sake of this thesis, I choose for the time being to treat the world of Guild Wars 2 as an actual society. Later on, I will go into depth about social interactions throughout the game and

²¹ Other MMORPGs typically have an exponential growth in how much XP is needed to level up compared to what level you are actually on. Meaning that advancing from level 1 to level 2 may just take a minute, while, leveling from level 59 to level 60 might take a few days.

how they may be interpreted anthropologically, but I will start by giving an overview of the people who play Guild Wars 2, and how they do it.

The people who play Guild Wars 2

Long before starting my fieldwork, I read Bonnie A. Nardi's "My Life as a Night Elf Priest – an anthropological account of World of Warcraft". In it, Nardi describes the people she interacted with within World of Warcraft (WoW):

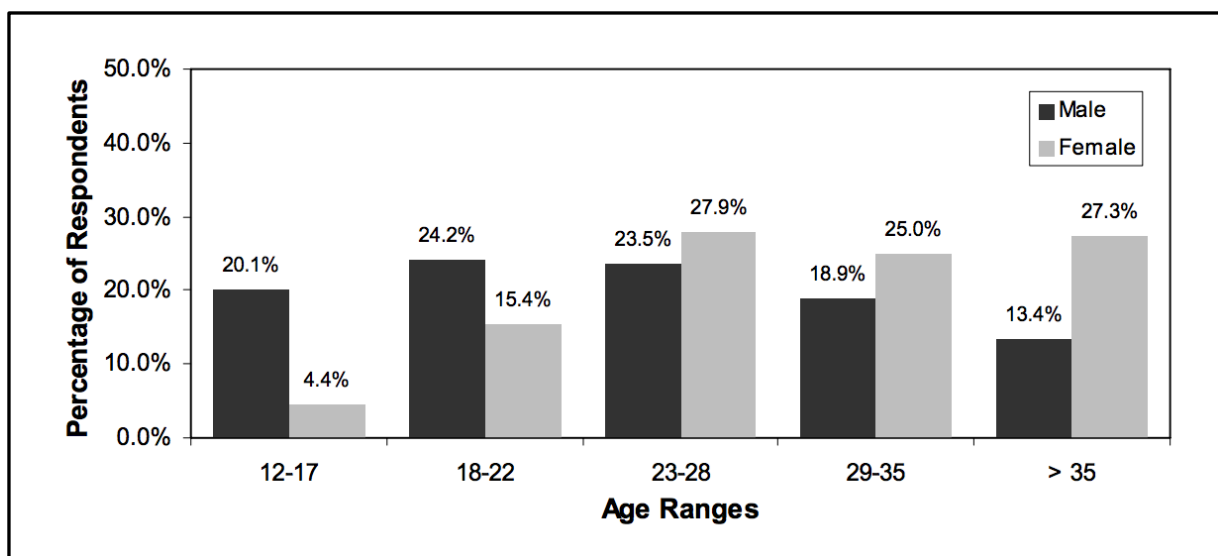
The *WoW* player population had considerable variance in age, gender, and social class. One of my online friends was a carpenter who worked in a factory making windows. Another was an intensive care nurse. An older guildmate had multiple disabling chronic illnesses. He took many medications, some of which kept him awake. *World of Warcraft* was a major part of his social life, and he played at odd hours, day and night. A former guild master in Scarlet Raven [Nardi's main guild while doing research in WoW] was a graduate student in chemistry. (Nardi 2009:18)

When starting my own fieldwork this quickly came to ring true also for Guild Wars 2. In general, there is not much talk of life outside of the game, so (disregarding my ARG-members who were explicitly asked) I hardly got to know the circumstances of gamers' lives outside of Guild Wars 2. What I managed to pick up along the way, though, was that there were students, homemakers, painters, school kids, entrepreneurs as well as artists and music teachers. Their age also varied greatly. There were kids, youth, young adults, adults and elderly. The players also originated from varying places geographically. Although choosing a specific, and maybe geographically anchored "home world", players are sorted into servers depending on how many people are currently on a certain server²². This meant that even though I had chosen a European home world, I would play on different servers every day, and sometimes even had to change servers during game play. Because of this, I was playing with Norwegians, Germans, Italians, but also people from the US and Canada. Of course, the fact that I encountered a variety of players from a number of different social groups, age groups

²² Players are sorted like this when a certain server has only a few players left. Once on another server, there would then be more people, making gameplay more enjoyable. Players have one hour to voluntarily switch servers and are given a reward if doing so. After one hour, the game will force remaining players to switch servers.

and geographical places does not mean that the entire player population of Guild Wars 2 is made up of equal parts young and old etc. It would have been interesting to reference player statistics of Guild Wars 2, but to my knowledge this does not exist openly. However, a three-year online survey collecting data from 5493 users of MMORPGs was conducted by Nick Yee and published in 2006, revealing numbers on user demographics, as well as discussing user motivations and derived experiences. While the survey was conducted more than ten years ago and respondents were players from several different MMORPGs, his findings may be an indicator of how the player distribution of gender, age and occupation may be within Guild Wars 2.

Figure 10: Age Distribution within MMORPGs by Gender (Nmale = 4705, Nfemale = 788)



(Yee 2006:17)

When asking experienced players within Guild Wars 2 to give estimates of the age distribution among GW2 players, they typically described an older demographic than what is illustrated by Yees work. This, however may simply be because of the time that has gone by since his study. Several players in the age group between 35 and 45 could inform me that the demographic of video game players has aged along with them: “when I started gaming, we were all kids. Now we are grown up, and new generations have joined. Some of my guild mates are my rl [real life] kids age!”.

Considering Nardi’s description of her informants’ occupations in real life, Yee’s findings showed in the figure below did not surprise me. Although his findings do not go into detail about the occupations (and as an extension: the social classes) of MMORPG users, they do indicate that the players are not an entirely homogenous group.

Figure 11: Occupational Distribution of MMORPG users by Gender

<i>Occupational Distribution by Gender</i>						
Gender	Full-Time	Part Time		Unemployed	Homemaker	Retired
	Student	Student or Work	Full-Time Employed			
Male (n=2383)	23.9%	12.8%	50.9%	10.1%	1.5%	0.7%
Female (n=438)	12.8%	11.4%	48.0%	12.1%	13.3%	2.5%

(Yee 2006:18)

What *did* surprise me during fieldwork was the amount of people playing with friends they knew *in real life (irl)*, either wanting to simply hang out digitally or wanting to stay in touch when living apart. Nardi had mentioned this phenomenon, but I had not expected it to be as noticeable as I found it in Guild Wars 2. I will touch back into this when accounting for the way players interact with each other at the end of this chapter.

Another factor to take into account when considering who the players are, is the level of expertise the players have. Throughout the game one will have specific levels that suggest one’s knowledge and skill to other players, but all players have previous experiences with games, be they digital or analogue. This adds another dimension to the question “who is a noob?” To briefly touch in on this: the levels of expertise of the players of Guild Wars 2 vary greatly. Some have only played Guild Wars and Guild Wars 2; others have played multiple games. Some start GW2 as their first ever MMORPG, but have played several first person shooter (FPS) games previously. In short: the spectre is as wide as the number of players²³. Among my informants most players had little or no previous experience with MMORPGs, but most of them had played a video game before, while a few of them had considerable experience with MMORPGs (mostly represented by Guild Wars and World of Warcraft).

²³ In October 2015 the number of active players was estimated to be 3.1 million active users per month. Gaidiosi, J. (2015). "Why ArenaNet is Investing in ESports." Retrieved 13.10., 2017, from <http://fortune.com/2015/11/24/areanet-investing-in-esports/>.

One last note about my informants in particular: While some of them knew each other from real-life relationships (some of my informants were friends, couples or otherwise related), none of the players who had come to know each other in-game met face-to-face during my fieldwork. Several of them, however, interacted with each other on other social platforms (typically revolved around Guild Wars 2), and thus knew each other's real-life identities.

How players interact with the game

As previously mentioned, the main aim of the base game is finishing the main narrative of the game: The five races cooperating to defeat Zhaitan, the Elder dragon of Orr. In practice this is done by levelling up, finishing story chapters as they occur and making sure ones' equipment and skills are ready to face new challenges as they occur. Doing all this, requires a nomadic playing style. There are always new places to discover, and new "peoples" to get to know.

Exploring the map is also a quite aesthetic experience, as all zones have different landscape, weather and background music, and thus have a different "feel" from the next one.

Figure 12: Shaemoor Garrison in Queensdale



Figure 13: Godlost Swamp in Queensdale



Figure 14: White Paper Hill in Timberlaine Falls



Figure 15: Aquanarium Hydropost in Bloodtide Coast



Figure 16: Battling a Risen Putrifier in Hunter's Table, Straits of Devastation



One may travel by foot, swimming (ones' under-water skill set is different from the one on ground), "gliding" (can best be described as jumping for long distances with wings), and in

September 2017 the expansion “Path of Fire” brought “mounts” which are riding animals carrying ones’ avatar faster over greater distances.

Activity-wise one may focus on completing zones, completing renown hearts, develop a craft with which one can make objects and consumables that may be sold or given to other players, helping ones’ own guild by taking part in guild missions or contribute by developing tactic plans, consumables that guild mates may use to have better chances in battle etc. Although the actions and activities available within the game certainly are numbered, they seem unending, and bring a complexity to the game that resembles real-life experiences. Although the overall way of playing the game is developed in each player early on, the day-to-day activities may still vary depending on what is needed to complete whatever the main objective is. A lot of these activities may resemble “work” in the sense that they not necessarily are fun, and often involve doing the same task repeatedly. I will further explore this phenomenon in chapter 6.

How players interact with each other

Considering Guild Wars 2 does not offer verbal communication, the chat function is essential for players to communicate. Later in my thesis I will comment on how the chat is used and what types of methodical challenges the use of chat as the primary type of communication presented me with, but I find it important to give an initial outline a few ways in which the chat is used by the players. Textual communication does not include physical clues. This makes irony and sarcasm as well as overall tone and emotion hard to identify. Embedded in the chat function, however are *emotes*, which are commands that allow players to make their avatars move in certain ways:

Figure 17: List of emotes

Command	Chat message	Targeted message
/beckon	[Character] beckons.	[Character] beckons to [Target].
/bow	[Character] bows.	[Character] bows for [Target].
/cheer	[Character] cheers.	[Character] cheers for [Target].
/cower	[Character] cowers.	
/crossarms	[Character] crosses their arms.	
/cry	[Character] is crying.	
/dance	[Character] is busting out some moves, some sweet dance moves.	
/facepalm /upset	[Character] is upset.	
/kneel	[Character] kneels.	
/laugh	[Character] laughs.	[Character] laughs with [Target].
/no	[Character] disagrees.	[Character] disagrees with [Target].
/point	[Character] points.	[Character] points at [Target].
/ponder	[Character] ponders.	
/sad	[Character] is sad.	
/salute	[Character] salutes.	[Character] salutes [Target].
/shrug	[Character] shrugs.	[Character] shrugs at [Target].
/sit	[Character] sits.	
/sleep	[Character] goes to sleep.	
/surprised	[Character] is surprised.	[Character] is surprised by [Target].
/talk	[Character] is talking.	[Character] is talking to [Target].
/thanks		
/ty /thx	[Character] is grateful.	[Character] thanks [Target].
/threaten /menace	[Character] is threatening.	[Character] threatens [Target].
/wave	[Character] waves.	[Character] waves at [Target].
/yes	[Character] agrees.	[Character] agrees with [Target].

(Guild Wars 2 Wiki)

Because these commands don't cover all types of movements typically used in face-to-face communication, players often use their own "made-up" emotes consisting of a "/" and the description of the movement they would like their avatar to perform. This, of course, does not result in any movements by the character, but indicates emotion to other players.

Additionally, writing in capital letters is a common way of indicating shouting, and a word

following an asterisk (*) indicates a previously mispronounced word. As I will illustrate later on, however, chat is typically not necessary to communicate well among players.

As previously mentioned, Guild Wars 2 was specifically designed to invite players to cooperate with each other. One specific way of random interaction is found in the events that occur throughout the game. Although one may simply ignore these events, most players choose to participate in them. There is little to no chat communication while an event is active, but communication is still present, although less obvious. The visuals in the battle give information to all players about who has which character profession, and thus, who has which strengths and weaknesses. This helps players be aware of who might need assistance, who may run directly into the battle and who might be better off taking on a healer role for the duration of the event. Of course, new players often do not pick up on this information and simply fail to adapt their playing style to the situation, often resulting in either a personal failure, relying on other players to revive ones' character, or worse, ruining the chances for everyone else. If the latter is the case, players often express their dismay with not-so-kind comments in the chat.

I often encountered players who were part of only one guild; the guild they had established solely for their group of friends (or family) to play together; and were not interested in playing the game outside of this social arena. For them, the game functioned as an extension of their life external to the game and forming social relations within the game became unimportant. Although they cooperated with other players throughout the game, often, these guilds were held exclusively for external world friends or family, and players who were part of such a guild rarely got into one-to-one interactions with players outside of their own guild. No rule without an exception, though. There were several players, including myself, who knew other players outside of the game before starting to play together, and players who entered the game solely to play together sometimes joined a bigger guild to be able to take part in bigger guild quests. I also came across family and neighbourhood guilds inviting single players into their guilds even though they did not originally fit in. Still, social interaction was in most cases limited to the players they already knew. Even though playing together with IRL friends was common, most players interacted freely between one another, establishing new relationships and groups that influence their actions and identity as well as the players' narrative throughout the game. I will further explore how players are social in chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline my methodological choices during my fieldwork and discuss some of the challenges when conducting anthropological fieldwork in an online context. Based on my experiences during my time in Guild Wars 2, I will also illustrate how online anthropological fieldwork can differ from the more traditional fieldwork in a geographical place. In many ways, the two types are still very equal, but my research shows, that some important characteristics differ in such a profound way, that they suggest that the anthropological study of virtual worlds sometimes need to differ from the traditional anthropological method.

The plan and how it changed

My original methodological plan was split into two different parts. I planned to start playing without identifying myself as a researcher, anonymously observing how players communicate not only with each other, but also how they communicate with me, an absolute beginner. I wanted this part to be as close to an actual noob-experience as possible. Because anthropology in itself is not the study of how the anthropologist is welcomed in different contexts, I also knew that this could only be a small part of it all. I also needed access to more stable groups where I could identify as a researcher in order to ask questions more freely. The plan, therefore, was to create another character with which I would join a guild and do more specific research. I was also planning to name this character something that would signal that I was a researcher and not just another player. This last part was an idea I got both from Boelsstorff and Nardi. Both of whom use avatar names as an indicator of their status as a researcher. In my case, I chose to name my account “antronewb”, discretely signaling my status to other players, while choosing the more anonymous name “Lani Medusa” for my main character.

In addition to this plan, I was quite keen to get as close as possible to a real noob experience. This led me to start the game as if I was simply playing it for entertainment purposes like everyone else, making choices about my character out of personal preference rather than fieldwork tactics. In hind sight I couldn't really have started my fieldwork in any other way, this being my first ever fieldwork *and* my first time participating in an MMORPG. I simply did not have the experience to do any tactical choices for my character because I simply did not yet know how to play the game. Later on, I went on to try playing with other avatars, only to figure out that my initial avatar suited my fieldwork goals rather well

considering I had chosen one of the most common types of avatar, especially among new players: A *human soldier*.

I had originally set a time frame of up to three weeks for the anonymous part of my fieldwork, but after just a few days I reconsidered my plan altogether. I had not yet identified as a researcher and was worried how some of my contacts would react if they found out. At this point I had not yet established any lasting relationships, but rather randomly participated in open events as well as casually chatting with a few people. What changed my mind was the fact that these people suddenly were actual people to me rather than theoretical avatars. What they thought of me suddenly mattered enough to me that I did not want to conceal my identity only to later on be exposed as what I really was. Because of this, I started identifying as a researcher already by the end of the first week.

During this first week, I gained the minimum required skills before one may be useful in a guild, and I started looking around for guilds to join with research in mind. From Nardi, Boellstorff and Taylors examples I had assumed this part to be fairly easy. I had come to know the gaming community as welcoming both to regular players as well as anthropological researchers.²⁴ What thoroughly surprised me then was how hard it was to gain access to a guild that met my preferences. Going in to my fieldwork I had a list of criteria or at least preferences when picking a guild:

- It had to be relatively stable in terms of members but still allow for new players to join
- it would have to have existed for at least a couple of months so that the ‘culture’ of the guild would have had time to form
- the guild had to be relatively active with guild events happening a minimum of one to two times per week.
-

Although most guilds I encountered seemed to fit this description, most guild members or leaders refused my involvement in the guild as a researcher. At first I attributed this to the gamergate-phenomenon, that I had heard from other gaming researchers had just been very much talked about within the community. I assumed my role as a researcher was the problem.

²⁴ «Gamer gate» was certainly an exception to my perception of the gamer world.

When digging deeper, I discovered how I had been entirely wrong in my assumption. When asking to join a guild, one player answered:

[Fantasia Wilde]

I guess you could, but there wouldn't be much to study, we're a pretty low-key guild. People don't play that seriously, its mostly just for fun.

After this encounter, I retraced my steps, questioning other players why they thought of their guild as “not worthy” of being studied. Interestingly enough, most of them had a similar view as the above example. Two guilds had other reasons: They *did* play seriously and considered my experience to be lacking. The two guilds in questions, however, did not really match my criteria either, so this was no big loss. What interested me was how most players seem to play on an amateur level for entertainment only, but still consider the core culture of the game to be made up of the few players who play the game more competitively. This finding seemed to match on a group level the idea most individual players have of themselves as players rather than gamers (this will be further discussed in chapter 4). Because of this reluctance to let me study a “normal” guild, even after countless attempts of explaining how the “normal” was far more interesting to me than the “elite”, after about three weeks of not gaining any access I realized that I needed a new plan. And thus, I founded my own guild, Antronewb's Research Guild.

Identifying as a researcher on the Inquisitioners Map

Early on during my fieldwork, while I was still searching for guilds to join and study, I used to start my “day” by announcing in the map chat that I was a student researcher looking for a guild that would join my project. I tried to maintain a balance between playing the game to get ahead, and being a researcher and trying to get access by asking people to join their guilds, contacting players who had helped me or who I had helped etc. One day I got access to the *Inquisitioners Map* (a new region for me). Starting on a new map, I figured I would again state my business in case someone on this higher-level map would be interested in participating. And for once, someone answered.

[Lani Medusa]

Anthropology student looking for guild for research project. Might ask stupid questions. Let me know if your guild has room for me. 😊

[Kira Hai]

>uses le maymay game for science²⁵

[Yantham]

Asks on Inquest map for extra Science :D

[Lani Medusa]

What? U don't approve?

[Yantham]

Opposite, someone having humor for once

[Sirlith]

If using an inquest map then shouldn't it be, Anthropology/Inquisition student needs guild to ask/torture for information. Promises to be slightly gentle than normal.

[Sveka Hali]

i think you misunderstand the word antropology

[Yantham]

anthropology = unethical torture of live captures?

[Lani Medusa]

In this case more like, anthropology = following people around asking stupid questions

[Yantham]

Humour=british humour=ironic humour

[Sveka Hali]

Well, you as an ambassador of the idea of antropology should defend its purpose shouldn't you

[Sveka Hali]

Scrap idea, make that into study

[Lani Medusa]

Oh, I can defend the purpose, just sayin the method sometimes feels a bit weird...

²⁵ «le maymay» refers to the mispronunciation of «meme», a humorous internet phenomenon depicting a picture or drawing, most commonly with a text overlay that says something ironic, sarcastic or humorous. When using “le maymay” as a response to someone it implies that the first person would mispronounce the word “meme”. In short: Kira Hai is calling me a noob at this point.

[Sveka Hali]

I used to do quantitative studies in a biomedical lab, but now I mostly do qualitative interviews. I get you.

[Lani Medusa]

Nice to know im not alone

[Sveka Hali]

Do you have a set framework or more explorative?

[Lani Medusa]

In general anthropology is more explorative

[Yantham]

u goys talking dirty?

[Sveka Hali]

does not have to be I think

[Sirlith]

yes

[Sveka Hali]

I mean, you do have to confirm findings I assume

[Sirlith]

but not dirty as you think

[Fottumble]

filthy science

[Sirlith]

dirty as in most hope to ignore and be glued to TV

[Sveka Hali]

Well it is a shaky thing I guess

[Fottumble]

I ain't watched TV for so long (addicted to games lol)

[Sirlith]

well here that is. I don't know about anywhere else

here=UK

[Sveka Hali]

couldn't you just not ask and simply study people? would imagine it interferes with the study itself anyway

[Yantham]

do u need to declare to them that you will be studying them

[Sveka Hali]

and just say, If active fun guild or whatever

[Sveka Hali]

not always

[Yantham]

*studying

[Sveka Hali]

sometimes you need that, which is formal consent

[Lani Medusa]

I do need that.. :P

[Sveka Hali]

but sometimes the researcher can argue strongly against it

[Yantham]

I don't see how you need formal consent for this

[Yantham]

will be ultimately anonymous

[Sirlith]

it's a shame that most might not entertain that just for a simple study since real names
ever need be used in a game

[Sveka Hali]

that is one argument

[Mik Referee]

if you are not naming people then I don't think you will need permission

[Sveka Hali]

look up the "hawthorne effect"

[Sveka Hali]

whats the angle of the study?

[Sveka Hali]

is it the reason why you need it

From there even more people joined the discussion. The opinions were varied, and discussion went on for quite some time (about 1,5 hours from start to finish). At the end the discussion

was mainly between Sveka Hali, Sirlith, Fottumble and myself. I let the others discuss the issue without much interference since I was curious to know how gamers themselves think about this issue. The discussion ended in somewhat of an agreement among the players that this was a complex issue, but considering no real names are used in Guild Wars 2, and my study revolved around multiple guilds rather than one particular guild, it would be within ethical practices to study people without their knowledge and consent. It also resulted in me establishing my own guild for research purposes. I named it “Antronews Research Guild” or “ARG” for short. Both Sirlith and Fottumble apologetically declined my request of being allowed access to one of their guilds, again arguing that their guilds were not worth studying. They did not join ARG either. Sveka Hali also refused to add me to an existing guild, simply because he was not the leader of any of the guilds he was a part of. He did however join ARG, as did Yantham.

The topic of consent was a frequently discussed topic in ARG throughout my entire fieldwork, and I am not sure there is an absolute answer to the problem. Even Sveka Hali, who had been quite absolute in his view of the topic on this first encounter, later went on to switch sides back and forth as the discussions went on. In my search for “the right thing to do” in this respect, I turned to the anthropologists who have gone before me into the digital realm. Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor address the issue in their handbook for ethnography in virtual worlds:

We may be required for bureaucratic reasons to obtain signed consent forms [...], but they are not our principal means of ensuring informed consent. What is necessary is that we make clear our presence as ethnographers and maintain ongoing dialogue about our purposes. (Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012:135)

In our view it is legitimate to see subscription-based virtual worlds as having public areas where it is not necessary to have every person in an interaction sign an informed consent form. [...](Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012:134)

Moving on from the discussion above, and basing my decision on the handbook of method as well as the gamers’ own reasoning, I did join two other guilds (although general consensus within ARG was that it would be superfluous to anonymize guild names in a thesis I have renamed the guilds in question “The Dromedars” and “Tyria Fightclub”) but I chose not to identify as a researcher, nor did I ask for the members’ consent when joining. While this was

something I previously had considered to be wrong, I had come to the conclusion that this was necessary to complete the study and get usable results.

Using Antronewb's Research Guild (ARG) to interview informants

Because I did not openly identify as a researcher or ask members for their consent, the kind of study performed within these guilds ended up being more on the participating end of the participation-observation scale. Naturally, asking in-depth questions about certain situations or habits would be odd behavior from my end, so when I did have questions, I simply asked them within ARG. Within these two other guilds, therefore, I was just another player. After a while I did ask some of the members to join ARG, resulting in a broad base of informants across multiple guilds, races, experiences etc. This also permitted me to ask more freely about certain quests or activities that had occurred within The Dromedars or Tyria Fightclub simply because some of the ARG members were also members of The Dromedars or Tyria Fightclub. When creating ARG, I wrote a welcoming message that all new members would read upon entering the guild. It consisted of information about who I am, what the research project evolved around and how informants' actions and answers within the guild would be used. It also contained a sentence about how the guild was not only for chatting about the questions I had but would also be involved in the occasional guild quest. While the original first members were on the more experienced side, most members of ARG were new to Guild Wars 2, MMORPGs or to gaming as such when entering the guild. After about two weeks and onward ARG had between 15 and 20 members, mostly based in European countries, with a couple of exceptions from the US. During the course of my fieldwork new players were added, some players quit the guild, some quit the game altogether, but most of the players who joined ARG within the first few weeks continued to be guild members throughout, gradually advancing from new player to experienced gamer.

The first week of ARG my main aim was to build up the membership count as well as figuring out how to use a guild for research purposes without affecting the gameplay of the players involved. I had scouted for new members in the beginners' areas of the maps (also creating new avatars that would let me recruit members from other race areas²⁶), asking people to join only after I had cooperated with them on renown hearts, events etc. In many

²⁶ This proved to be difficult simply because new players from other areas were not able to join quests or events until they reached a higher level, permitting them to travel across new areas to the entry-level areas of other races.

ways I created my own gaming community. Exactly because of this, I kept the guild activity (beyond chat interviews) to a minimum; I wanted to study how new players are welcomed among experienced players, not how new players are welcomed in a research guild consisting of new players all interested in how new players are welcomed. This issue kept me on my toes throughout my fieldwork and challenged me to constantly put myself on the outside of the project, viewing my fieldwork, the communities I was engaged in and ARG from an anthropological viewpoint. Although ARG turned out to be a well-functioning methodological choice for my project, I would not recommend a separated research guild for any and all anthropological studies of the digital realm. Had I not been part of other guilds while conducting research within ARG, my findings would be weak at best.

While participation and observation can be said to be good ways to learn how a certain society works, it also has a certain effect on the people being studied. Even in traditional fieldwork informants will be self-reflective when answering questions asked of foreign people who want to write about them. If the researcher was never there, the people would never have been asked these questions, and would never have to think about them (Rabinow in Hastrup 1995). This rings true in digital fieldwork as well. In my case this effect would be amplified considering my target group consisted of new players who would be easy to influence and could easily mistake ARGs “culture” for the overall “culture” of GW2. Ultimately this could lead to ARG influencing how informants see the gaming community and thus, influencing the outcome of my research. Another way that answers could be contaminated is if the informants answer based on what is considered to be the moral way to do things, rather than how it is actually done (Gottlieb and Graham 1994). One may even argue that this risk is enlarged within the gaming community considering the stereotypical gamer is quite different from the average gamer. Several gamers I have encountered have expressed a need to distance themselves from this stereotype and other assumptions that are made of the gaming community (the community being rough bordering hostile, that gamers are lazy asocial people, or that gaming is for teenagers or people who “don’t have a life”). Especially among the more advanced gamers within ARG this was a recurring phenomenon, demanding more in-depth interviews and analysis to uncover what was really the general practice within GW2 rather than what my informants wanted me to know.

After an initial stage with some trial and error conducting research within ARG, a sort of rhythm slowly formed within the guild. I made an effort to post new questions/discussion topics one to two times per week taking time to be present for follow-up questions as soon as someone answered. Typically, only one or two people answered at first, but because guild

chat is visible no matter what area of the map one is in, more often than not, other members joined in on the discussion as soon as they finished the quest or event they were currently involved in. Other times, members of ARG posted in the guild chat when they had come across something we had previously discussed, picking up the issue where we had left it.

As some of my examples of group chat will show, conducting group interviews within virtual worlds is not always easy. Because of the delay between writing and actually posting content, there are often multiple conversations going on at the same time, making it difficult to decipher who is talking to who. Additionally, the person(s) being interviewed may be chatting with other players simultaneously, or even completing quests while they are participating in a group interview.

Discussions within ARG often ended in someone partnering up to help each other out with a quest they were currently working on, or on some occasions, people logging off because of the late hour. Just like other guilds then, Antronewbs Research Guild acted as a meeting point where players could get to know other players and ask for help and guidance.

For me, the members of ARG acted as a resource group for semi-structured interviews as well as a network of individuals who knew about my research and invited me to join quests and events whenever they considered something to be of relevance. This opened up for research across a magnitude of social groups in the form of both formal and informal bonds. In many ways my ARG informants functioned like Berreman's interpreters in northern India, as described by Borchgrevink:

His first interpreter was a Brahmin whose high status facilitated Berreman's entry to the village. That status, however, also led to a careful screening of all information made available to him. The high-caste people of the village were eager to demonstrate their high status to the city Brahmin, so they concealed the many local practices unacceptable to mainstream Hinduism. The low-caste people, on the other hand, were reluctant to talk to the interpreter. After a few months the interpreter became ill and Berreman was forced to replace him. This time he acquired a retired Muslim schoolteacher – and that changed the fieldwork completely. (Borchgrevink 2003: 103)

Having someone to help me gain access to “the locals” was a tremendous help. Because I had multiple “interpreters” I also had the advantage of gaining access to multiple types of groups throughout my fieldwork, giving me enough first-hand experience for actual comparison

between groups and phenomena, rather than being oblivious to the parts of the gaming community that were previously hidden from me.

Given that my involvement in The Dromedars and Tyria Fightclub felt like a grey area of ethical research and thus was quite unpleasant for me, I made it a point to ask my contacts to introduce me to the other players present whenever I joined a quest or event outside of ARG that was still relatively private or manageable in terms of the number of players involved. Only at a handful of occasions did it happen that someone did not want me to participate in light of my role as a researcher.

Anthropological research in virtual worlds

Although the anthropological method is participant observation, the job of an ethnographer is not only to participate and observe, but to “get past the “official account”” (Bourdieu in Jenkins 1994). While this was certainly my aim when starting my fieldwork, I had quickly realized that the tools I had been given through anthropological fieldwork were somewhat lacking in my context. How was I to *get past* the official account when I wasn’t really getting access to the official account in the first place? Jenkins suggests another way of getting past the official account: “being an apprentice” in the society one studies. Through this, he argues, one may better seek to understand the native’s categories, both their intellectual and physical/bodily ones. Bernard has a simple way of measuring whether this is achieved or not: If the participating observer knows when to laugh when the native’s think something is funny, and at the same time can avoid being laughed at without having said something funny, the participant observer can be said to have succeeded (Bernard 1994).

Online apprenticeship

Like real apprenticeships and traditional fieldwork, the early stages of fieldwork within a game are characterized by learning the basics. When doing traditional fieldwork, this might be learning the language, figuring out what the natives eat or how their daily routine goes. In Guild Wars 2 the first day of playing consisted of building my first character, deciding not only how I wanted it to look, but also its traits, professions, history etc. Also, I had to learn how to use the keyboard to control my avatar’s movements, as well as figuring out how the map works. These things were shown to me by the game itself. Most video games, online and offline start with some kind of training period. In GW2 ones’ skills, traits and attributes increase as you level up. This way, a new player only learns the most essential commands at

first, before learning more and more commands and having more and more options in battle later on, when he is more experienced.

Apart from the technical things that must be learnt, one must also learn what is expected when cooperating with others, how to make contact and what protocol to follow when cooperating, but also in disputes. Until this is internalized, it is typically quite obvious who is a noob and who has been playing for a while. An extreme example from my fieldwork was when I visited the beginners' area where new human characters start playing. I was looking for informants to add to ARG and wondered if I would be able to distinguish between new players who had just started playing, and old players who had just started playing with a new character. It quickly turned out that this was not easily discovered except when the new players are new not only to the game, but also to the type of game: I was running around in the form of Lani Medusa, helping players and chatting to them, when I suddenly saw an avatar standing in front of an NPC asking him to be friends (the chat text appears like a speech bubble over an avatars head when written into the map chat). At first, I was wondering if the player was actually talking to someone else in map chat (I had just returned to map chat from a private chat), or if he really was trying to befriend this NPC. When the player continued with "if u don't wanna be friends u could just say so but stop ignoring me!" I realized what I was dealing with.

Because of this inherent demand for a period of apprenticeship, I did not stand out as a researcher during my fieldwork. In traditional fieldwork, the anthropologists will always be somewhat of an outsider, even if she is "going native". Online, however, this is less evident.

I looked just like any other player. For many practical purposes I was just another player. I could not have studied raiding guilds without playing as well as at least an average player, and fully participating in raids. By contrast, when I was walking around villages in Papua New Guinea or Western Samoa, I was obviously an outsider whose identity required explanation (Nardi 2010:34).

This description of Nardi's role in World of Warcraft also describes perfectly how I, when playing Lani Medusa, was simply just another player. Because the avatar and the game itself eliminate the typical clear markers such as skin color, clothing preferences and language, it becomes harder to differentiate between a native and an outsider in a virtual world context than in a traditional fieldwork (of course, a skilled eye will always be able to categorize

players by their gear as well as how they play). Additionally, as I will explain, an “online outsider” may actually become an “online native”.

Michael Wesh argues that students and professors today belong to two different groups of people who use digital media. He argues that since today’s students have been using digital media during their entire upbringing, they can be said to be “online natives”. Most professors, on the other hand, have only a basic understanding of the use of digital media, and are thus categorized as “online immigrants” by Wesh’s definition. While being able to use digital media, they will never be fully “fluent”.

While the situation is rather different in GW2 and online games in general, Wesh’s terms are good to “think with”. Every player in an online game has at some point been an “online immigrant”, no one is born into an online game. Still, every “online immigrant” in online games has the potential of becoming an “online native”. Compared to the traditional kind of fieldwork, this leaves the anthropologist with the exceptional possibility of becoming completely submerged in the online society she is researching, thus gaining access to knowledge that would otherwise be hidden to outsiders. Considering the mandatory period of apprenticeship within the game, it is tempting to re-name Wesh’s categories “online novice” and “online master”. The term “online novice” still suggests a certain expectation that the player will one day become the master, as well as telling us something about the relationship between the novice and the master. While a novice may become a master’s equal at some point, and may even surpass her masters’ skill level, an immigrant will always be an immigrant no matter how integrated he is or what skill level he holds.

“Going native” in an online context

Even though apprenticeship can be a good way to emerge oneself into a society when doing traditional fieldwork, this may also result in the dreaded act of “going native” which generally is considered to be a hindrance to the anthropologists aim of keeping an academic distance to her field. Considering the above terms “online novice” and “online master”, one may argue, that an anthropologist who has gained the necessary level of expertise to be called an online master, necessarily has “gone native”. This, however, is a quick jump to conclusions that must be further discussed. “Going native” in a traditional sense means fully immersing in the society one studies. For example, if an anthropologist decides to marry one of her informants, or decides to reside in her field site permanently, one may speak of a full immersion in the field. While this can be said to be a good way to fully understand the society one studies, it also hinders an academic distance to the field. In online games, however, one may acquire a

master level of playing the game, but still walk away from it at the end of the fieldwork.

“Going native” in virtual worlds may be defined by Gray Graffam’s words:

The desire to support the group and not let them down in reaching a goal, and eventually beating the game, is a powerful driver governing play. It led to my full immersion in WoW, which came at the expense of engaging in real-life activities. The sense of responsibility and moral obligation to those you are playing with online conflicts with real-life duties and responsibilities. The potential consequence, of course, is that immersion in this world causes you to disconnect from reality, potentially harming relationships with friends and family (Graffam in Wesch and Whitehead 2012:140).

What is interesting to note, is that this description, when describing a traditional field site would be describing every anthropological study ever made. When studying a society away from home, one necessarily will have to distance oneself from family and friends back home. “Going native” in traditional fieldwork and “going native” online are two very different concepts. The factor both have in common, and what makes “going native” such a debated issue is that while going native, the anthropologist loses her ability to analyze her field site from “the outside”. Categories become so internalized that the anthropologist no longer can access anthropological knowledge while trying to understand the society she studies (Hastrup 1995).

While this is not an ideal situation, Bernard proposes a solution. According to him “removing yourself every day from cultural immersion so you can intellectualize what you’ve learned, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly” is the way to go (Bernard 1994:137). Although his words are aimed at traditional fieldwork, I have found that his solution is an absolute must when conducting online fieldwork, especially one that requires the researcher to become an “online master”. If one succeeds in removing oneself from the field site, one may even avoid “going native” in the online context. For me, this practice proved itself to be crucial both because of the obvious danger of becoming too involved in the field site considering it takes place within a video game, but also because research through Antronewbs Research Guild would not have been credible without continually distancing myself from it.

Final thoughts on my methodological choices

While my initial plan was firmly grounded in the anthropological method, my experiences during my first three weeks of fieldwork led me to question the effectiveness of this method within Guild Wars 2. The anthropological method, of course, is participant observation. This method has been dominating the field of anthropology since Malinowski made his case about it in the early 1900's (Malinowski 1922). The method has not only been dominating the field ever since, it also serves as a strong base for the identity of the discipline of anthropology. However, participant observation, like every other academic method, has its pro's and con's. In "traditional" fieldwork the critiques against the anthropological method are most commonly based around whether or not it may be an objective way to study a community or culture. Although different in digital space, these factors are still valid critiques of participant observation as a method for online academic study. Although my methodological choices during my fieldwork are somewhat untraditional, they did enable me to explore my research questions without leaving the anthropological method entirely. Thus, it may be safe to say that, depending on the research theme, participant observation the way anthropology has been known for it during the last century of research, may need some alterations when used within a digital space. Future effort needs to be made to further explore how digital spaces may be studied and understood.

Chapter 4: Forming relationships within Guild Wars 2

In this Chapter I will address my main research question “how are new players welcomed in virtual worlds?” I will do so by examining how new players versus experienced players may be defined or distinguished from another, and by presenting the different types of relationships found, and not found, within Guild Wars 2. In addition, I will draw on classical anthropological theories such as reciprocity, rituals as well as power and resistance to understand the way in which relationships are formed within the game. Although computer games present the anthropologist with a new framework within which new questions about humanity and culture emerge, I argue that the basic human phenomena identified and agreed upon by anthropologists still apply to these new digital worlds. Additionally, my findings support Morningstar and Farmer’s observation that a virtual world “is defined more by the interactions among the actors within it than by the technology with which it is implemented”(Morningstar and Farmer 1991:274 inBoellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012:25).

Defining terms

Noob vs newb vs new player

My first encounter with the word “noob” was long before I started on my master project. I remember being at home with my now husband, then fiancée; me reading, him playing World of Warcraft (WoW). Normally, when being in the same room as him while playing, all I can hear are his fingers running over the keyboard, his right index finger clicking on the mouse and the occasional sharp inhale, mostly followed by a long, relieved exhale. At the time, I had scarcely given his games or his gaming a thought beyond the occasional annoyance of him apparently not being able to hear anything I said when playing. On this evening though, he all of a sudden pushed himself backwards away from his desk, throwing his headset on the ground, shouting something similar to “FUCKING INCOMPETENT NOOBS!” Needless to say, I was shocked. He is normally not a very vocal man and prides himself on being likeable and calm even in the middle of a conflict. This was not typical. But I suddenly found myself curious: what was a noob, and why did it have such power over him? Later, when he was calmer, he explained to me how a “noob” is someone who is new to a game or to gaming as such, and does not know what he or she is doing. Often, as was the case on this evening, he could inform me; these people single handedly could mess up group events within WoW simply by refusing to take simple instructions from more experienced players. In many ways, this was the first push that led me towards my interest for digital worlds.

While doing research on “digital worlds” and “noobs” before starting my fieldwork, I also came across the contrasting, but similar term “newb”. In short, the two are similar in that they both refer to a person who is new either to a specific game or to gaming itself. They differ however, in that a noob generally is considered a bother to more experienced gamers, often ignoring advice, being overly confident in their own abilities, and not being aware of game culture and thus making a fool of themselves without necessarily noticing. A newb is considered a humble new player eager to learn, asking for advice and apologizing when making a mistake. While the latter is regarded on a positive note, being called a noob is often interpreted as an insult.

In addition to these definitions, it is important to note that a gamer playing in a beginner area in GW2 is not necessarily new at gaming as such or even at playing GW2 (see chapter 2). When referring to a specific “new player” I will specify which of the above variations is applicable.

Gamers

To understand who the opposite of a newb is, I wondered how gamers themselves defined this. When does a newb call himself a gamer? After another gamer calls him a gamer? When he himself identifies as one? How is a “gamer” defined? In short, the term “gamer” is just as complex as “noob” and “newb”. Before playing Guild Wars 2, I had some experience with playing Sims3 and Sims4 as well as a MMORPG specifically aimed at teenaged girls, called Star Stable Online. Beyond this, my computer game experience only included learning games played at school as well as a failed attempt at playing “The Longest Journey” when I was 12. I classified my computer game experience as limited, and thus did not consider myself a “gamer”. What I quickly discovered upon starting my fieldwork and asking around about the “gamer” term, is that most people playing video games also consider themselves to have insufficient gaming experience to call themselves “gamers”. This perception was coming from people playing not only GW2, but multiple other video games both online and offline, for up to 40 hours a week, many of which had done so for several years. When asking these people what they considered a “gamer” to be, the most common answer was “someone who is playing video games for a living”. Upon further investigation, this seemed to be limited to people actually making money from gaming or streaming gameplay online in real time. YouTubers, like the Swedish, UK based PewDiePie, typically did not classify as a “gamer” even though he makes money playing games, and reviewing them through his YouTube channel. When asking new players new to not only GW2, but to gaming as such, about how

they defined a “gamer” the answers were somewhat different, but had a similar ring to them. One new player (new to both GW2 and relatively new to gaming as such), Franken Blue, answered:

[Franken Blue]

i think they know what they’re doing. Professionals almost. Like if i mess up or something these guys will step in and scold me for it

[Lani Medusa]

How do you mean “professionals”?

[Franken Blue]

Dunno [I don’t know].

[Franken Blue]

i guess they have expensive gear and play with headsets n stuff. U know the guys who complain about fps²⁷ and ping²⁸ and s***? Those are gamers.

[Lani Medusa]

I see.

[Lani Medusa]

How would you describe the gamers who get paid gaming, then?

[Franken Blue]

Wht? People get paid to do this?

[Lani Medusa]

Well, maybe not gaming GW2, but there are tournaments for some of the bigger games were people win big money. Some people have sponsorships and stuff...

²⁷ “fps” refers to “frames per second” which is the measure of how many picture frames are shown per second. If the fps is low, the picture will move slowly and twitchy. This typically happens when playing a game in such a high resolution (the highest is typically called “Ultra”) that the graphics card of the computer is simply not strong enough.

²⁸ “Ping” refers to the network latency between a player’s client and the game server. “high ping” typically causes lagging (twitchy picture), while a “low ping” gives a smooth motion on the screen. Considering GW2 is played in real time, a low ping is always beneficial as it allows for quicker data transmission between the player’s client and the game server, and thus a smoother gaming experience.

[Franken Blue]

Crazy world. i didnt know that.. i guess peopl are good at all kinds of things. i mean if someone gave me money just to eat, id[I would] def [definitely] do that too.

In short, people disagree about what a true “gamer” is, but everyone seems to consider only the ones more experienced or more “hard core” than themselves to be “gamers”. This also seems to apply to non-gamers defining what a “gamer” is. For them, the definition is even broader than that of Franken Blue.

I have not interviewed any professional gamers (people who make a living gaming), and thus cannot comment on how they define the term, but my findings suggest that the term “gamer” may be said to be defined relative to the person using it. In my thesis, I will use the term as a description of any and all people playing a computer game. I alternate between “gamer” and “player”, but generally find the former to be more fitting, considering the connotations often applied to the word “player”. In my paper, I use both terms simply for variations’ sake.

How a newb becomes a gamer

As I explained in chapter 2, Guild Wars 2, as most other computer games, comes with a learning period where the player is guided through how the game works and what it revolves around thematically. Although one may be able to play and advance in the game after the completion of this initial period, I argue that some more time is required to reach a level of play that is considered to be respectable by other players. In many ways, becoming a gamer may be measured in the same way Barnes proposes one assesses a good participating observer: “If you are a successful participant observer, you will know when to laugh at what people think is funny, and when people laugh at what you say, it will be because you *meant* it to be a joke” (Bernard 2011: 277, original emphasis).

To reach this level of understanding, it is necessary to have experience beyond what the learning period can provide. While the missions in the initial part are in PvE mode, and often in private instances, the learning period is mostly spent alone, or with NPCs rather than actual people playing the game. This means that while one might learn the technical skills of how to use one’s avatar to fight and how different enemies respond to different actions, one learns little to nothing about how players interact with each other or what is considered normal behavior. This lesson is learnt by integration into the community after the game itself has given the player free reins. At which level a new player is no longer a new player but

rather a gamer, will vary greatly depending on the player's previous experience, how fast he learns, how often and for how long he plays, how many questions he asks and so on and so forth. In short, there is not a final answer to when someone is no longer a new player, but rather a gamer.

Within ARG, there were several gamers who were complete newbs in the sense that they, like me, had little to no gaming experience. Following these individuals through their GW2 journey therefore was eye opening in regard to the question of when a newb becomes a gamer. It differed greatly. While some of my informants gradually evolved into what they themselves and others around them defined as a gamer, others, as was the case with Franken Blue, were pushed right into it.

During a guild rush with only eight players were the aim was to defeat an army of skritt (a non-playable race resembling rats walking on their hind legs), Fentila the guild leader, a sylvari elemental, made a mistake and was quickly targeted by the skritt leader. Generally when doing these kinds of events it is arguably more effective to attack the army before attacking the main boss. Making this mistake therefore resulted in our leader being downed. Even with the rest of the group attempting to heal him, he quickly found himself defeated and having to start over from the nearest waypoint. In his absence, Franken Blue was the only one having a scholar profession and therefore the only one being able to attack from afar, out of the skritt boss' range. The group, still under chat instruction from our defeated leader, had to work together in a new way. Myself and two other soldiers raced in head first to defeat the skritt army, while others attacked them from afar, being careful not to hit the skritt boss (doing so would result in being targeted, facing the same destiny as our leader). NPC bosses target the player who inflicts the most amount of damage, and since Franken Blue would be able to deal the most amount of damage, but still was the least protected player in terms of armour, the group cooperated partly by keeping the skritt boss bound to a certain place preventing him from attacking Franken Blue, and partly by continuously healing Franken Blue as the boss got some damage in anyway. Without it being planned, this particular event served as a test for Franken Blue. Immediately after the rush was over, I congratulated him for his success. This was, after all, the first time he had had a major role to play in a guild event, and without him we definitely would have lost.

[Lani Medusa]

Good job on the skritt boss!

[Lani Medusa] salutes [Franken Blue]

[Franken Blue]

heh, thx! that was awesome!!!

I felt bad for Fentila though..

[Lani Medusa]

No worries, hes a big boy ;) Also: he was the one pushing you, and you delivered.

[Franken Blue]

stop it, your making me blush :P

A few days later, Franken Blue opened a private chat with me:

[Franken Blue]

help! Is this normal???

[Lani Medusa]

Omg... please don't ask me anything about your private parts...

[Franken Blue]

Haha, funny but no...

Fentila asked me to join another rush!

[Lani Medusa]

Ok, that's cool..

Right??

[Franken Blue]

yea, but without him!! id be the only scholar!!

[Lani Medusa]

Nice, must mean youre good. ;)

[Franken Blue]

I guess, just feels as if im this kid sitting at the adult table for the first time...

[Lani Medusa]

Hah, I get that feeling. Are you freaking out??

[Franken Blue]

Like crazy!! I got invited to a dungeon yesterday and at first I thought it was a mistake.. turns out the others actually wanted me to join. ME!! guess im grown up now..

[Franken Blue] is busting out some moves, some sweet dance moves.

Although this transformation was unexpected for him, Franken Blue, all of a sudden was regarded as a more experienced player. Besides having him telling me about it, I myself also made a note of how differently he was treated by other players following the skritt-rush compared to how he was treated prior. Not to say that he was badly treated before, but there definitely was a difference in how he was included in chats about tactics, who could and should be a part of a certain group and what types of challenges the guild should take on next. He later moved on to being given the “lieutenant” role within the guild, acting as one of the tactical leaders.

As previously stated though, the way in which newbs become gamers differ greatly. Through my interviews with the “complete newbs” group within ARG, it became evident that the way in which a person develops from being a newb to be considered a gamer is highly personal and differs greatly from person to person. The differences lie in *how* they get there as well as *how long* it takes to get there. Generally, one may argue that frequent and longer playing sessions along with being an active member of an active guild ensures a shorter journey from newb to gamer. This was the ARG conclusion as well as my observation from the outside. What seems relevant to note, however, is that most players seem to have one or two events quite early in their initial gaming period that they identify as significant events in their journey from newb to gamer. These events typically concern not only their own achievements but also how they feel they are perceived by other players. I will further address this in chapter 5.

Classification of relationships in Guild Wars 2

In order to examine the how’s and why’s of how new players are welcomed in digital worlds, one must first establish a basic knowledge of what is considered to be normal within the digital world one studies. In my case that meant learning the classifications used by gamers when it comes to relationships. How is a friendship defined in an online environment? How is partnership defined? What about alliances or enemies? To give this analysis some anthropological structure, I have chosen to base my analysis on Robert Paines article “In Search of Friendship: An Exploratory Analysis in ‘Middle-Class’ Culture. Given that most gamers who play Guild Wars 2 are middle-class Europeans and Americans²⁹, the findings of Paine may shed some light on how gamers view relationships IRL. Although his article

²⁹ Considering that the game has its own version in China, and this version not being available to me during my fieldwork, I find this generalization to be satisfactory for now.

originates from 1969, it concerns basic human relationships still found today without much alteration, even within virtual worlds. His classification may serve as a backdrop upon which to base my classification of relationships found within Guild Wars 2. Before I do so, however, it is important to note a few things.

The first being that Paine's definition of a "friend" and "friend" in the context of GW2 are two quite different phenomena. While Paine's definition revolves around the private and personal, drawing on such notions as equivalency, affection and relevance, in GW2 the word "*friend*" simply points to the technical act of adding someone to one's contact list within the game. A *friend* within the game is thus not necessarily imposed a friendship type value as defined by Paine. A *friend* may be a partner, an acquaintance, a sort of mentor, one's brother IRL, but also a close friend or someone one has just passed on the map depending on how one chooses to use the "add friend" function. Some gamers use this function actively while others rarely add another gamer to their list, even guild mates. All such relationships may be present without the gamers having added each other as "friends" within the game. My point here is that whether or not someone has added someone else as a friend in game has little to no relevance for how their relationship may be classified.

The second point to note is that gamers generally speak of themselves, their avatar and their account as one. One does not befriend just an avatar within the game. When adding someone to one's contact list, the *account*³⁰ is added, not just the avatar. This means that when talking about relationships formed within the game, I speak of the relationship between the physical persons, rather than the avatars. In addition, it may be wise to note that two physical persons may have multiple types of relationships with each other depending on which avatar they are currently using, and which guild they are currently representing. Because of this, changing one's avatar may be compared to having different roles IRL (i.e. son, father, brother, employee, boss etc.).

Kinship

One of the most obvious differences between "real life" and GW2 is the lack of kinship-bonds between gamers. Two players may of course be related and playing together, and as noted in

³⁰ One account may have multiple characters connected to it, meaning that if someone befriended Lani, and I used another character to play the game the next time I logged on, my new friend would not necessarily recognize my character, but my character would still show up as a friend.

chapter 2, some guilds are distinct family guilds established solely for the purpose of family members playing together. This however points at relationships which are already present in the outside-world and are not formed within the game. To clarify, one will generally never experience two gamers identifying a child as theirs *in-world* without said child being their child also outside of the game. On role-playing servers this might actually happen, but even then, it is a case of make-believe rather than a representation of actual family bonds. It would be very interesting to explore these bonds further in order to understand relationships within role-playing communities. This, however, was not my aim, and as I spent very little time on such servers, I have limited knowledge about these kinds of relationships. One aspect of kinship within GW2 that I did investigate further though was how such real-life kinship-bonds influence gamers' cooperation within the game. One example came from a mother-son duo I met during an event. They both joined my research guild later on, and one of the topics we discussed was how they would describe their relationship in game versus IRL. Andrea Fury, the mom, answered:

In here I'm not just his mom, you know. In here we are more equal and we can do things together not because we are family and we have to, but because its fun and we enjoy each others company. [...] we have grown closer IRL as well. It was kind of awkward at first, seeing him as not just my son, but something else as well, but now we make quite the team!

Her son, Dom, had a similar view.

I like how I can be in charge and be the one teaching her something. Before she was always the one in charge, and my skills were never important. Or at least not my in game skills. Gaming wasn't really a thing for her, so it feels good to be appreciated. I was skeptical at first, but its actually fun with her. I'm glad she doesn't suck though.

What may be classified as mother-son-behavior because of their relationship prior to entering the game, might actually be friend-behavior or even partnership-behavior despite the partners being mother and son. This of course, is not the case for every mother and son playing GW2 together, but hints at how the game may influence and change the dynamics of relationships outside of the game. It also suggests that the kinship bonds that may be found are not necessarily the bonds that influence in-game relationships the most. As I will explain further

on, in-game dynamics seem to have far more power over gamers' relationships than their relationships prior to entering the game.

Friendships and partnerships

Upon entering Guild Wars 2, I had high expectations that I would form friendship bonds with other gamers through my fieldwork. By reading the monographs of Tom Boellstorff (2008) and Bonnie Nardi (2009) I had come to assume that a common characteristic of MMORPG's is that they facilitate friendships across geographical borders as well as across age, social class, gender, religious and political belief etc³¹. While this rang true to some degree within Guild Wars 2, I was surprised to find that "friendship" within the game not necessarily meant "friendship" the way I defined it prior to entering the game. After further investigating this issue, I concluded that the types of relationships I had found within Guild Wars 2, much more resembled what Paine describes as "Relationships less than friendship"(Paine 1969: 515). Although I do not agree with his use of the words "less than" in the context of virtual worlds (I prefer the term "other than"), I find his classification of relationship types such as "partnership", "professional relationship", "patron-client relationship" as well as "group fellowship" to be accurate representations of the most common relationships found within GW2.

Partnerships

Partnerships in the way Paine describes them may be found in all corners of GW2. These types of relationships may be classified as gamers cooperating with each other and communicating about their interaction without the intent to establish a deeper relationship. One may sort partnerships into two categories: Temporary ones and more or less permanent ones. Temporary partnerships are often formed by gamers meeting by chance while attempting to complete the same task at the same time. Although the gamers may continue to play together, most often this cooperation ends after logging off or when one of them decides the cooperation should end. Typically, neither of them add the other as a "friend" within the game. If they at all communicate by chat, this is typically rather superficial in terms of what type of information is exchanged. This may be simple questions like "are you also on quest xxx?" or "do you want to join forces?", as well as the occasional exchange of weapons and consumables. These types of relationships are temporary and only last until one of the gamers

³¹ In addition to the works referenced, this was a reemerging topic among friends and family of mine who had experience with MMORPGs.

decides to log off or pursue other challenges. Gamers using the “Looking for group” function when entering dungeons also typically engage in this type of temporary relationship.

What is interesting to note, is that, contrary to partnerships IRL, gamers typically do not recognize their “partners” after their initial meet unless they repeatedly meet by chance and based on this move on to a more stable type of relationship³². Since new gamers often change the appearance of their avatars when receiving or buying stronger gear, avatars change their looks all the time. One does not necessarily recognize them from one day to the next unless one remembers their name. Considering the number of gamers typically encountered per playing day, there seems to be a common acceptance of not remembering avatar names or account names. One gamer may also own multiple characters and switch which one he plays with from day to day or even from hour to hour. This makes identifying known gamers quite hard if not adding them to one’s “friend”-list³³ or being in the same guild as them. Since only the avatars’ names as well as other snippets of information about them show in gameplay, it is only possible to learn the gamers’ account names by clicking on the avatar and opening a new dialogue window. Typically, gameplay requires fast actions, and does not allow for such exploration of who one is currently cooperating with. Thus, maybe the most common type of relationship within GW2 is the temporary partnership. However, this type of relationship may evolve into the more permanent partnerships found in guilds and between “friends”.

The more permanent type of partnership still looks very similar in terms of what actions are taken and what the gamers communicate about. One difference may be the planned cooperation typically conducted only by more stable partners. Gamers plan to cooperate at certain times in certain places to complete certain tasks or challenges. Although the communication no longer just revolves around yes and no questions, the type of communication is still quite superficial although a bit less so than with the temporary partnership. Between stable partners it may be relevant what time zone the partners live in or what kind of IRL responsibilities they have that might interfere with gameplay.

³² Because of this, it is tempting to name these types of relationships “acquaintanceships” within the GW2 context, but this term is already in use in Paine’s list of defining terms of relationships.

³³ Requesting “friend” status means that if the other player accepts, you get notified whenever this gamer logs on or off. Additionally, guild mates appears as a turquoise dot on your map when logged in.

Professional relationships and patron-client relationships

While partnerships are generally characterized by a near-even balance between the parties, professional relationships typically involve one party needing the expertise or skill of the other. In Paine's classification, he uses doctors, dentists, teachers etc as examples of who one would be in a professional relationship with. Although some relationships found within GW2 may resemble such a relationship I argue that these would more often be better classified as patron-client relationships. There are NPCs with the roles of merchants, teachers, priests and generals throughout the entire universe of GW2, but considering these are NPCs rather than having actual people controlling them, they can hardly be classified as professional. Patron-client relationships among players however are fairly common. In GW2, these are typically guild leaders, commanders and mentors. The Leader of a guild is typically the same person who created the guild but does not need to be; guilds may have several leaders depending on who the initial leader promotes to leader status. Leaders have all access to the guild and how it is run, who has what kind of membership and who is sorted into what squad for guild missions etc. Naturally, this kind of power inflicts on the gamers' relationship with other guild members.

Other kinds of power roles one may acquire within the game are those of commander and mentor. A commander is someone who has unlocked the commander mechanics, enabling him to create and manage squads of up to 50 people. Squads created by a non-commander will only have room for up to 10 players. Typically, a commander will identify on the map if his aim is to complete a raid or event that requires more than 10 players. Other players may then travel to his location and request access to the squad. This gives the commander the power to pick and choose between players. Often this serves as a tactical preparation for big missions. Players are picked by profession, level, gear, and sometimes even by reputation or guild allegiance. While mentors (players activating the mentor tag) don't have an equally explicit power over other gamers as the commander or guild leader, they do gather gamers, and are thus often regarded as the obvious leader for the event at question. In all three cases, the player with the power role offers the opportunity to take part in a big event, whether it be a raid, an event tied to one's personal story or the *Living World* content, or an event that is date-specific and tied to IRL events. The participants offer loyalty, even if it is only for a short while, in return.

Group fellowships

A somewhat more stable type of relationship found within GW2 is perfectly outlined by Paine's definition of group fellowships:

[...] there exists only something 'less than' friendship for the reason that the members of the group or institution have a relationship to each other *only* in terms of their dedication to it; i.e. they have chosen the group and not each other, nor must they begin to choose between each other within the group.

(Paine 1969: 518, original emphasis)

Unsurprisingly, these types of relationships are commonly found between guild mates. Gamers tend to form closer relationships with a chosen few other gamers in the same guild, but most relationships within a guild may be classified in terms of the individual players' dedication to the guild. Considering guilds may have a vast number of players in them, it would be impossible or at least impractical to aspire to maintain close relationships with all members of the guild. In addition, one may choose to participate in several guilds. Gamers typically are actively involved in two to three guilds, often forming close relationships with other gamers who participate in the same two or three guilds, while maintaining only a "group fellowship" type relationship to the other people within the guilds they are a part of.

Relationships among users of other virtual worlds

While the classifications I have made regarding the types of relationships I have identified within Guild Wars 2 define the relationships as "other than" friendships (or as Paine would have it: "less than"), other friendships are found within other virtual worlds. Making friends within virtual worlds can be awkward at first, given the absence of physical clues, but users of virtual worlds have reported deeper connections to their virtual world friends than their real-life friends, because the absence of the body makes for "friendships that last" considering the relationship and the intimacy shared within it is not "clouded by offline issues" (Carter 2005:157). Tom Boellstorff also states friendships the "foundation of cyber-sociality; the friend is the ordinary social form for homo cyber" (Boellstorff 2008:157). In his definition of friendship within the virtual world of Second Life, he draws on the notions of choice and egalitarianism, and while he does not explicitly draw into account the notion of intimacy, his descriptions on how users engage in intimate relations within Second Life in terms of friendship, partnership, love and sexuality make it clear that the relations found within Guild

Wars 2 are quite different from the ones I found within Guild Wars 2. One important note though: considering I mainly studied new players, the lack of intimacy between players may be due to their limited time spent within GW2. Carter has also found that “older” users (in terms of how long they had been part of the virtual world of Cyberville, her field of study) made greater emphasis on their in-world relationships’ meanings than did “younger” users. This may also ring true for Guild Wars 2, potentially completely changing how relationships may be classified.

Enemies

As in all other social contexts, there are cases of disagreement, arguing and fission within GW2. During my fieldwork I witnessed IRL-friends arguing in-game and splitting IRL because of it, guilds splitting into two or even entirely dissolving because of disagreement or the leader switching to another guild, multiple guilds declaring each other as enemies forbidding its members to be a part of both guilds, as well as players simply avoiding each other. Where alliances are found, enemies are also found. Because of the mere size of the game however, generally disputes are solved quite quickly by one or both players (or guilds) involved simply “moving” to another part of the game either in terms of server/world, guild, type of avatar played, or temporarily playing in a different part of the map to ease the situation.

How relationships are formed in Guild Wars 2

What the game allows for

In previous sections of this chapter I have already briefly touched upon the different ways the game itself allows for interaction. To further explore what kinds of interactions are constructed by the gamers themselves versus by the game developers, it is important to make note of what types of interactions the game itself allows for. In addition to the chat function these are:

- multiplayer worlds that allow for spontaneous by chance meetings
- dynamic events that gather nearby gamers around a common goal
- guilds that facilitate more strategic cooperation
- parties that open up for short time cooperation
- a ‘Looking for Group’ function that allows gamers to meet other gamers for harder tasks and dungeons and serve as a gateway into more stable groups

- Harvesting materials that open up for the exchange of materials, gear and consumables between gamers, making them interdependent
- Dungeons that facilitate cooperation on a higher level than open events
- World versus World events that establish a world identity and unity among the gamers of a specific world.
- The different professions that are all necessary to complete most challenges, compelling gamers to seek out partners who have different professions than themselves.

The list could go on. In short: the game developers have done their job. The question is what scope of creativity remains for the players; which parts of the “culture” are not constructed? What kinds of interactions have emerged from the gamers themselves? Additionally, another question emerges: How are the limitations regarding communication within virtual worlds dealt with and bypassed by gamers? Even though the structure of the game is highly influential on the types of actions made possible within Guild Wars 2, the sections below will hopefully illuminate some of the areas within the game that make clear that even in this digital realm, it is still humans we are studying.

A common enemy

One evening when logging in to the game, I quickly became aware that something was going on. People were asking in the chat about some sort of event that apparently was about to start. Some people were asking whether the event required some sort of build up before one could join, and it seemed like there were different views on this. After what seemed like an endless back- and forth exchange in the chat, I finally decided to simply follow a mentor tag, and sure enough, not many minutes later, the event started, and more and more players gathered at the site. Less than a minute after the event started, it was near impossible to see anything on the screen in the forest of avatar names, and glares and flares from the battle. It became hard to select my targets simply because too many characters were in my way. The aim of the event was to break through a gate behind which the enemy was fighting back. In front of the gate, several other NPCs were defending the gate. These were quickly overcome, simply because of the vast number of players participating. I was playing Lani at the time, meaning I would have to engage in close combat to participate, but every time I tried to fight an NPC, I only managed to just arrive to the character before it was defeated by someone behind me. That first part went by quickly, without much fuss in the chat. Everyone was busy fighting.

The second part was about weakening the building using bombs. To do this, we had to run back and forth between the gate and where the bombs were found. We ran back and forth for what seemed like endlessly long, and the gate only took very little damage for each bomb that exploded in front of it. Some players tried to use their professions' special traits and skills but failed. Using bombs seemed like the only option, and at this point, characters with light armour stopped participating because the bombs would hurt their characters. Several minutes went by without the door giving any signs of giving in. For me, it suddenly felt boring, almost cruel, to let so many people work on something that felt like it would never work. I was starting to get annoyed. And I wasn't the only one. Some people stated, "I'm out" or "gl [good luck]" in the chat, leaving the instance. Then a comment appeared in the chat changing the whole feel of it all. "This gate holds itself together better than a Nokia!" I found myself actually laughing out loud. Nokia was amongst the most popular brands of cell phones in the late 1990s and early 2000s and was known for long lifetimes on their phones. When smart phones started to appear on the market, there was a period where attempting to destroy an old Nokia phone was considered a challenge. People recorded their attempts of destroying their old phones with rocks, in between doors, driving over them with cars and bashing them with sledge hammers. The movie clips were very popular on social media sites such as Facebook for a while. The people I was playing with obviously knew about this. Some typed "lol" in the chat. Some cheered (by using chat *emotes*³⁴). Some players who at this point had just observed the action, started participating again. We suddenly were a team.

One might say that it was the event itself that facilitated the cooperation between the people who were there, but in fact it was a single humorous comment which inspired the unity of the group. The human reaction to struggle, or to a common enemy, although constructed, appears to be the same even within a virtual world. While there is no real class struggle in GW2, the game itself acts as a power counterpart for the people playing the game. Thus, forms of resistance may be found practically everywhere, and the humorous comment described above acts as one of these. Scott describes foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson and sabotage as "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups" (Scott 1985:xvi). Most of these forms of resistance are non-existent in GW2 simply because you would need a body to perform them, and the avatars provided are not programmed for all of these actions. However, as explained in chapter 2, there are a number of commands that make one's avatars perform various actions

³⁴ See page 30.

that are commonly used to display ones' state of mind or reaction to a comment or event. These actions (and the "made-up" emotes mentioned also in chapter 2) are commonly used in a humoristic or sarcastic way. Of course, some of Scott's examples may be found within GW2 even without the use of avatar emotes. The actions in question however are typically aimed towards other players rather than the game itself. Dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, feigned ignorance and slander towards the game itself would do no good and in most cases seem foolish, but these actions are quite common between gamers. As for the other forms of resistance proposed by Scott: foot dragging, pilfering and arson is simply not possible within the game, and sabotage of the game itself would require extraordinary technical abilities. No, the forms of resistance within Guild Wars 2 (and most likely most other MMORPGs) are more concerned with the notion of a common enemy or a common goal, using humour, irony and sarcasm towards the game itself, its characters and sometimes its developers:

During a PvE guild mission with seven other members of the guild Tyria Fightclub, the group got stuck on a jumping puzzle with a time limitation. They are typically doable by most races and professions (although I did struggle a lot with them in the first couple of months) but are considerable easier to do if partnering with a *Mesmer* since they have the ability to open *portals* through which allies may traverse. Originally, there had been a plan in place (including a Mesmer) to ensure the success of the mission, but as luck would have it, our Mesmer did not log in on the day when the event was planned. We proceeded anyway, quickly regretting our decision when we 20 minutes later returned, having failed the mission. The guild chat went as follows:

[Ranyara]

Sorry guys – I'm heavy... Cant jump...

[Xaca]

yeah, me too. dunno y [don't know why], countdowns make me gain weight

[Tlallinli]

lol [laughing out loud] sure its not the pizzas?

[Tlallinli] /ponders

[Xaca]

nah, no pizza, my gf [girlfriend] has me on gluten free these days.

[Xaca] /shrugs

[Ranyara]

condolences

[Tlallinli]

im sorry bro

[Xaca]

serious tho, I think it's the timer

[Ranyara]

yea, it stresses me out too...

[Ranyara]

would be way more fun w/o [without] the countdown imo [in my opinion]

[Tlallinli]

I bet anet [ArenaNet] come up with this s*** just to mess with us

[Xaca]

lol, like "how do we make this impossible?"

[Xaca]

/rubbing hands together "I will make them scream!"

[Ranyara]

/making popcorn to watch them die

[Xaca]

"die by my hand!" [this is a phrase that is commonly heard from some hostile NPCs when they attack]

Humour acts as a unifying factor establishing a sense of belonging (or exclusion). As Goldstein puts it, "Through laughter – one's own as well as that of others – one's naturalized and proper "place" within the social structure is outlined and reinforced, as well as contested" (Goldstein 2013: 54).

One of my informants, a young man, played the game seemingly alone. He didn't play with offline friends; neither did he take part in any guilds or dungeons. After asking him about why he chose not to do so, he told me he was quite shy, and didn't like writing English, since that wasn't his mother tongue, and other players seemed to be able to write faster than him. He still enjoyed playing the game and argued that he was being social in the game while avoiding chat contact. The experience of fighting *together with other players* was enough to have a sensation of being social.

Even though events (such as the NOKIA example described above) require cooperation to finish, players typically don't use the chat during an open event. The example above could be said to be an exception during my fieldwork. Still, in this case the chat was used for humorous purposes, rather than tactics, which almost always would be the case in dungeons, guild rushes and WvW. This implicates that in open events all actions and choices are the individual's own responsibility, and no one is really in charge. Mostly, it looks like a bunch of people targeting the same thing and fighting on their own until it is over. Looking at such an event from the outside, one might think that the players would get the same amount of joy and fun out of it if all other players were NPCs. Still, when interviewing players about this phenomenon, and asking about how this possibly can be "social", their responses have been "we fight together, therefore we are on the same team", and "even though we don't talk, we still communicate through actions". In short, again: it's about having a common goal, or more often: a common enemy. In addition, unlike IRL, players in GW2 know what role they play defined by their characters specific set of skills and attributes. Very little communication is needed to successfully cooperate because ones' skillset is so explicitly showcased by the avatar.

However, in some cases, even within a game where the characters' roles are so clearly structured, communication *is* needed. I have already touched upon some ways in which one may communicate through the game: chat windows allowing certain players to see what is being written, while others are excluded, and emotes, which are small avatar actions made possible by the game developers. Emoticons and abbreviations are also commonly used.

In addition to these non-verbal ways of communicating, guild members, but also temporary *parties*, use third party communication channels such as Skype while they play to communicate more efficiently. In doing so, players bypass the limitations the game provides, adding an extra factor to the communication that would otherwise be non-existent. While this is a more effective way of communicating than using the in-game chat function, this way of communicating also has its limitations and necessities: Firstly, all players must speak the same language in order to understand each other, and secondly, this only works with a rather small group of players. Typically though, players use the server language or English if playing on an open server, and they limit the number of players communicating verbally to a minimum, prioritizing players with high status within the guild if playing with a high number of guild mates. I have also come across guilds where verbal communication during major events was organized by character profession, either grouping all characters with similar

professions and (thereby similar functions within the event) together, or grouping characters with different kinds of professions together so that they would be able to assist each other.

Chapter 5: Rituals in virtual worlds

One of the most universal phenomenon in the human condition is the ritual. In order to properly identify possible rituals within Guild Wars 2, a quick reminder of what constitutes a ritual is necessary. Rituals have a magnitude of different forms and expressions, but are recognized by Durkheim in that they are “symbolic action integrating individuals in the social order and the social construction of institutions in a society” (Durkheim 1912 in Sande 2002:281), while Turner refers to Van Gennep who “has shown that all rites of passage or “transition” are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying “threshold” in Latin), and aggregation.”(Turner 1969:94) One may argue that most anthropologists concerned with rituals most commonly center on the types of rituals either connected to:

- recurring natural events such as the seasons changing
- rituals of coming of age or initiation
- events rooted in tradition, history and myth
- rituals concerning the enforcing of law and moral expectations
- rituals regarding the exchange of goods, land, women and children

Additionally, there is an increase in the study of rites concerning natural disasters and climate change over the last two decades (see for example Dove 2014).

While the five types of rituals I have outlined here may be found within Guild Wars 2, they need to be re-interpreted to be able to draw clear comparisons between rituals in real life and the ones in-game. To be able to properly analyze rituals within Guild Wars 2 I will distinguish between rituals created by the game (or rather: the game developers) and rituals created by the gamers themselves.

Game-created rituals

As previously noted, the distinction between which aspects of game culture are constructed by the game developers and which have emerged among the gamers is not an easy one to define. When it comes to rituals however, this is rather straight forward in terms of “what types of events does the game structure facilitate” and “what events occur within GW2 but are unrelated to the game structure”. While it is easy to dismiss “game-created”³⁵ rituals as not

³⁵ “game-created rituals” here refers to activities which could be interpreted as rituals, but that are facilitated by the game structure, or rather by the game developers rather than the gamers. On a side note: gamers do contribute to the development of the game by suggesting changes or even additions to the game. In this way, the structure of the game may be said to have been

“real”, it is important to consider that they still may bear meaning for their participants. Julie Peteet refers to Schieffelin who suggests that participants in rituals:

may not all experience the same significance or efficacy. Indeed, unless there is some kind of exegetical supervision of both performance and interpretation by guardians of orthodoxy, the performance is bound to mean different things to different people.

(Schieffelin 1985:722 in Peteet 1994:32)

Considering this, I would like to point out that the only rituals that were identified as such by the gamers I studied were rituals with their basis in “game-created” events.

“Game-created rituals” may be as obvious as any open quest; any *renown heart, hero challenge, dynamic event*, or simply said: any quest that requires or facilitates cooperation between gamers inhabits the potentiality of becoming a ritual. The quests may differ in form, length and how many players take part of them, but all quests may be said to fulfill Durkheim’s definition of “integrating individuals in the social order”. In order to do so it is necessary for the ritual to be of a collective nature, and while gamers need not necessarily be aware of being “integrated in the social order”, events within GW2 may be said to have this function. In regard to this, one may sort all quests into two categories: Quests that reinforce the roles of the characters (given their professions), and quests that emphasize the benefit of having complementary roles by the temporary removal of these roles. In my analysis of coming of age rituals within GW2 I will further explore some of the rituals that reinforce the roles within the game, but for now, I will focus on the latter: Game-created events that serve as explicit liminal phases.

Early on in my thesis I described a mini PvP game within the city of Destiny’s Edge that was there only for the duration of the real-life Chinese New Year. While this was a rather unique event during my fieldwork, I did spend some time within Guild Wars 2 in the form of Lani Medusa around Halloween time 2016 (approximately two months after I officially had ended my time in the field). My aim was to take screenshots of some of the details within the game that I wanted to include visually in my thesis. Specifically, I wanted to take a picture of the city of Lions Arch, but upon entering the city, I instantly knew something special was going on; being the main city within the game, Lions Arch usually is quite crowded, but the

indirectly created by the gamers rather than having been created completely separate from them by game developers.

crowds on that day were huge. Halloween within Guild Wars 2 turned out to be even bigger than the celebration of the Chinese New Year I had experienced during my actual fieldwork: There were mini PvPs enabling players to fight each other in the form of strange beasts, characters being temporarily transformed into scarecrows, and a candy corn maze within which characters were transformed into candy corn monsters and losing their original profession and skills. The aim was to collect the most amount of candy corns while finding ones' way through the maze (the map that normally is shown in the lower right-hand corner of the screen was missing) and fighting off spiders at every other corner. During this event all players were on unfamiliar ground because of the maze, but also because controlling ones' avatar in the form of a candy cane monster was something entirely different than controlling ones' normal avatar. The avatar change was a challenge in terms of navigating the avatar through virtual space, in terms of battle (because the "normal" weapons were replaced by more "primitive" weapons in terms of strength and effectiveness) and because game structures that would normally govern gameplay (i.e. professions and character levels/experience) were non-existent. While being a challenge, this also turned all players involved in the event into equal parts, transforming the usual social structure into a quite obvious *communitas* where the norms of cooperation and fulfilling ones' roles were temporarily lifted.

While this was a rather extreme example, similar events did occasionally occur during my actual fieldwork as well. Also, some *renown heart* quests and dynamic events have similar challenges connected to them, making them typical examples of liminal phases and places of *communitas*. Even so, the events in which avatars and/or weapons were replaced, were not explicitly mentioned by my informants as being rituals or otherwise bearing significance. They did however refer to these types of events as "challenging", "annoying because I lost all the progress Ive made with my character" and "these s*** events destroy everything ive worked for! whats the use of legendarys [*legendary* gear is only available to top level characters and is expensive and time consuming to make] if I cant use them!?", while others stated "I like playing with the big boys, even a minigame" and "minis are fun! I normally don't do pvp, but this brings new fun to it".

Another "game created ritual" is found within instanced dungeons where small groups of players (sometimes guild mates, sometimes complete strangers) cooperate on bigger challenges demanding multiple players (often with specific professions and skills). Dungeons' impact on guild dynamics may best be described in Bonnie Nardi's words: "Whether intentional or not, cutting players off from all but those in the raid generated

closeness and social cohesion; players depended on the group with which they faced the game's biggest challenges"(Nardi 2009:119). Considering dungeons in GW2 are entered from specific virtual places that are accessible for all other gamers, while the dungeon itself may only be entered with the right number of grouped players, the act of entering a dungeon clearly emphasizes group affiliation to all that are excluded from it.

Gamer created rituals

The rituals described above may be considered rituals in light of their effect on gamers given their structure. The types of rituals I will discuss in this part however, are created by the gamers themselves, although not deliberately. One of the most common types of gamer created rituals, at least within active guilds, is the weekly or bi-weekly strategy meeting. This is a phenomenon that is not required by the game, but most active guilds are organized around these meetings. During these meetings, members of the guild gather in a secluded area or in the *guild* hall if the guild in question has obtained it, and the aims for next week's guild activities are set. These may be farming activities, crafting activities, specific dungeons or guild missions, or even PvP or WvW. The reason why I define these meetings as rituals is because they also serve as an arena for development of ones' role within the guild. When planning ahead, real-life considerations must be made, but also characteristics of the characters available must be taken into account when deciding on who gets what role in upcoming events. Thus, guild meetings are places in which gamers' potentiality is greater than before or after the event.

Additionally, just like dungeons may emphasize group affiliation internally as well as externally, guild meetings may also do so by sharing knowledge and information within the group only, thereby excluding non-guild members. Nardi describes this phenomenon using Huizinga's notion of the magic circle of play: "Arcane knowledge is shared inside the magic circle; it defines play activity and separates those who know from those who don't"(Nardi 2009:119).

While the main activities within guilds may be said to be guild missions, dungeons, and generally events that may be considered performative, a big part of being part of a guild concerns the preparatory phase before actually performing the main activity. Often, specific goods or consumables are needed in order to succeed in a certain guild quest, and players may use minutes, hours, days or sometimes even weeks in advance preparing (depending on the scale of the quest, the number of gamers who need said good or consumable and the rarity and/or value of the materials needed). The act of gathering materials and crafting them into

what the guild needs is commonly referred to as *farming*, and although generally considered a boring task, it is often institutionalized by agreements between guild mates to cooperate, often while simultaneously working towards “map completion”. Several guilds arrange *road trips* at specific times with specific routes based on where specific materials have previously been found. The routes are typically made by experienced players who have “been there, done that”³⁶. Less experienced players (who often are not as directly involved in the guild missions because of their lack of experience) often *road trip* both as a service to the guild, but also in order to level up and reach *map completion*. As I explained in chapter 2, *map completion* refers to discovering all *points of interest, vistas, waypoints, renown hearts* and *hero challenges* within a zone. In short: completing the map. Up until reaching level 80, this is the main way of advancing in the game by collecting experience points. After reaching level 80 though, many players focus more on guild missions, PvP and WvW. Even so, *map completion* combined with *farming* is a common activity in-between guild missions, and PvP and WvW events, and constitute a kind of gamer-created ritual found within Guild Wars 2.

Rites of passage

Previously in this chapter I referred to Franken Blue’s victorious effort in a guild rush as somewhat of a coming of age or initiation ritual. Even though the player himself perceived the situation as somewhat of a ritual, and he indeed in many ways transformed from being a newb into being a gamer not only in his own eyes but also the eyes of the other players, my findings suggest that coming of age rituals as they are defined and recognized within the anthropological discipline, are quite different than the ones I have found within GW2.

During my fieldwork, I did not once come across a rite of passage that was *planned* or expected in advance. Rather, the coming of age rituals made up by gamers were typically only identified as such after-the-fact by the gamers themselves. The part that stood out to my informants in regard to how they identified any given event as a coming of age ritual rather than just another event, was the specific way in which gamers interacted with each other as well as their performance within the quest. The player in questions typically had taken some sort of action that left the other players seeing him in a new light, and ultimately changing their attitude towards him, made evident by their actions or more specifically an increase (or

³⁶ If a character has completed all zones on the entire map “Been there. Done that” will be visible below the characters’ name for all other players to see. Other, similar achievements are also available.

decrease) in the degree to which other players included the new player in decision-making. In other words: whether or not a quest was perceived as more significant for any player's narrative, was largely impacted by that same player's actions. In Franken Blue's case the action he had taken was non-voluntary. He simply had to step in because he was the only player left with his specific skill set. In Andrea Fury's case, the action resulting in the sense of a ritual came entirely from herself.

[Lani Medusa]

Congrats on the big win!

[Andrea Fury]

Thanks! That was fun!

[Andrea Fury]

I finally figured out how to effectively use healing spells last week, and it feels so good to be of actual use to my guild!

[Lani Medusa]

Sounds familiar. I used way too long to figure that one out... A guardian who cannot heal, am I right? :P

[Andrea Fury]

Right!

[Andrea Fury]

I feel like Im finally doing what Im supposed to be doing, and now all events go super smooth!

[Andrea Fury]

Even if were losing, I kindof know if I did a good job or not.

[Lani Medusa]

That's awesome!

[Lani Medusa]

Did Dom [Andrea's son IRL] help you?

[Andrea Fury]

No actually. He was on a school field trip last week, so I did some dungeons on my own.

[Lani Medusa]

What? Andrea Fury gaming by herself!?

[Lani Medusa] is surprised by [Andrea Fury]

[Andrea Fury]

I know, I know

[Andrea Fury]

But I think it's a good thing I did! Doms a good teacher but figuring things out on my own is kind of exhilarating.

[Andrea Fury]

As you said: a guardian without healing spells etc. It just didn't feel right, and I wanted to be better at my profession, so I did some research and joined a dungeon. No idea who I played with, but they were 80s [characters on level 80 or above], so at first I felt like I played with baby-sitters.

By layer 2, I had it figured out.

[Andrea Fury] is busting out some moves, some sweet dance moves.

[Lani Medusa]

ARG-question incoming:

[Andrea Fury]

Shoot

[Lani Medusa]

How did you know you had figured it out? Did the other party members change their behavior towards you in the second layer compared to the first? Or were they still baby-sitters?

[Andrea Fury]

You see, that's the thing. I wasn't really sure I used my healing spells in a good way until one of them told me I did good. He said something like "see, I told you we would need a healer" in the chat. Obviously not directly aimed at me but still. I felt as if I had just passed a test I didn't know I was taking.

[Lani Medusa]

And after that they treated you differently?

[Andrea Fury]

Yes. I think three of them were talking irl, and during the first rush they only used chat to kind of give orders at me and the fourth guy. In layer 2, they all joined chat and we were a group. Less effective for them but including us better.

[Andrea Fury]

Also, they didn't give orders anymore, and they actually protected me instead of just ignoring me if (whenever) I got downed. Way less running on my part after that!

A striking and quite obvious similarity between the two cases I have presented here, but also many others, is the fact that these ritual-resembling events transform the players in question from *not quite* fulfilling their role within the game given by their profession, to *better* fulfilling their role. Both had experienced their role previous to their rite of passage as something uncomfortable (“It just didn’t feel right”), and them being on the outside of the GW2 community (“feels as if im this kid sitting at the adult table for the first time”). Although I did not investigate this further during fieldwork, I have come to draw parallels between these feelings of “being out of place” and Mary Douglas’ theories concerning the taboo of “that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries”(Turner 1969: 109).

There seem to be two major shifts or coming of age rituals for new players: the transition from being a burden to your team to being able to “carry your own weight”, and the transition from there to being of value for your team. This corresponds with the notion that most players have one to two defining moments they are able to recall from their initial period of gaming.

When asking my ARG informants why they thought some people recognize one such event in their early gaming life while others recognize two, both Sveka Hali and Yantham (the two gamers within ARG with the longest gaming experience) attributed this to the noob/newb distinction and argued that the people recognizing only one such event simply were not aware that they had been burdens or were so pre-occupied with the event at question that they did not think about it at the time. Considering this, it is important to note that several of the people I asked to tell me about their coming of age rituals had not given this issue a thought before my asking them. Most people could easily give me one example but had to think hard (some players even brought up the issue several days later) in order to identify the second event. Typically the hardest ritual to identify or recall was the one where a player transforms from a burden to a neutral part of a group. Based on this, the conclusion Sveka Hali and Yantham presented to me may be said to ring true.

One additional aspect to note is that these rituals may be experienced multiple times within the same game. While I mostly studied noobs, several more experienced gamers could tell me that these two coming of age rituals (burden to neutral, and neutral to valuable) reemerged whenever they joined a new part of the game, being unexperienced once more.

Guild Wars 2 as *communitas* and social structure

While I have outlined how isolated and recurring events within Guild Wars 2 may be interpreted as rituals, one aspect still stands unanalyzed. While the above examples assume the game itself to be the framework in which social structure is found and the events at question to be temporary liminal stages, Bonnie Nardi suggest a complementary, view on the topic: The “magic circle” not only refers to an exclusive group of gamers (i.e. within a guild), but also the entire group of GW2 gamers as a whole. Drawing on Turners 1982 findings of the *limen* as “necessary to play and ritual”, she concludes: “Players cross the threshold out of ordinary life to engage distinctive kinds of performative activity in a game space in which the rules are different, the culture unique, the rewards sensible only within the enclosure”(Nardi 2009:120). In this way “*communitas* is made evident or accessible, so to speak, only through its juxtaposition to, or hybridization with, aspects of social structure”(Turner 1969:127).

To recap let us revisit my initial five types of rituals studied by anthropologists:

- recurring natural events such as the seasons changing
- rituals of coming of age or initiation
- events rooted in tradition, history and myth
- rituals concerning the enforcing of law and moral expectations
- rituals regarding the exchange of goods, land, women and children

While the first is easily found within Guild Wars 2 in the form of game-created events such as the celebration of the Chinese New Year and Halloween, and the second is found in the gamers’ perceptions of certain events acting as a “rite of passage”, the remaining three types of rituals have not been addressed thus far. While the third type of ritual (rituals rooted in tradition, history and myth) has not been explicitly analyzed in my thesis, I propose that game-created events explicitly building upon the fictional history and customs of the *races* within Guild Wars 2 may not be said to be actual rituals because players typically do not assign any “out of the ordinary” meaning to these events *because* of the “histories”, “traditions” or “myths” that are embedded in them by the game developers. Rather, these events have the potentiality (just like I propose all game-created events do) of becoming rituals based on what meaning players ascribe to them. An unexplored extension of this interpretation leads toward the question of whether players on Role Playing servers ascribe

meaning to such events *because* of their basis in the “history”, “traditions” and “myths” of the *races* in the game, and *because* of the players’ emphasis on that kind of content within the game, and whether these events in that case may be identified as rituals. This, however is another topic entirely, demanding further research into what may best be described as a subculture within gaming culture: Actual role playing within virtual worlds.

The last two kinds of rituals identified above, will be further explored below. I argue that these types of rituals are present within Guild Wars 2 as acts of reciprocity regarding services, and acts of reciprocity regarding the exchange of equipment and consumables, respectively.

Reciprocity – The curse of cancer

Playing with a heavy armour character, I often envied other players’ ability to conquer NPCs faster than I could. Professions using heavy armour engage in close up combat. They typically don’t inflict as much damage as professions who attack from a distance, but in turn, they can take more damage, hence the distribution of tasks in the NOKIA example and the skritt example. A result of this, was that light-armour players often succeeded with tasks such as hero challenges faster than I did. For the most part, though, I didn’t struggle for too long with them. However, one time still before ARG, I came across an exception. I took on a hero challenge in a part of the map where I was seemingly alone. I didn’t think much of it, until my character suddenly was in a downed state, and I realized that the nearest waypoint was quite far away. I tried to fight back the hero challenge boss and had almost failed completely when another player arrived. He revived me, and we continued to fight the hero challenge together. It turned out that, even between the two of us, it was still a challenge. I was downed five more times, and every time, this other player revived me so that we could continue together. At one point, though, the other player got downed. Still fighting the hero challenge, and not sure how to keep fighting the NPC and revive the other player at the same time, I just kept fighting the hero challenge, not helping the other player. At this point, the NPC was almost entirely out of health points, so I managed to finish it by myself, but the other player was less than impressed. Seconds after the hero challenge was completed, this appeared in the chat:

“wtf? I save u like ten times and u don’t even bother to return the favour!?”

I tried to excuse myself, telling him I was a noob and didn’t know how to, but he simply responded with:

“I hope your mom gets cancer and dies”

He logged off after that. Besides making me extremely embarrassed, this event also made me curious. Could it be that reciprocity was as important within GW2 as I had found it in my own life outside of gaming? I started to notice how and when reciprocity emerged within the game and quickly noticed that every single kind action towards another player was rewarded either by a simple “thx” in the chat window, or by a reciprocation resembling the action which first occurred. From this, players of GW2 seemed very polite. When interviewing my ARG informants about this phenomenon (or rather: starting a discussion between them), the notion of obligation was brought to my attention. What I had interpreted as two players cooperating out of convenience (as portrayed in the section on how players meet and become “friends”, partners etc.) turned out to be hugely motivated by a sense of obligation.

As noted in Chapter 2, GW2 has several currencies embedded in the game itself, allowing for the exchange of *weapons*, *crafting supplies* and *armour parts* through a market place embedded in the game (the *Black Lion Trading Company*). While the goods traded through the Black Lion Trading Company do not demand reciprocation from either party beyond the obvious (one selling an object and the other buying it with in-game money), gifting objects (typically consumables) do, even if two players simultaneously give each other objects of approximately the same value. When asking my informants why they felt the need to reciprocate a gift even when they themselves had already given a different object to the other player, they answered with “well, I gave him something and he gave me something, so now we cooperate. it’s kind of like a pact. until the potions [the consumables exchanged in this particular case] run dry we are connected”, “he gave me something to enhance my chances of success, so I want to show him that it mattered, so I help him with his quests. I gave him nothing compared to what he gave me” and more surprisingly “I’ve invested in him, so I want to make sure that he uses it well”. These statements suggest that gift giving within GW2 binds gamers together at least temporarily, and sometimes these temporary bonds lead to more stable relations.

Although it cannot be directly compared to how Mauss explains gift giving as an interconnecting phenomenon between people within a society as well as between whole societies, the effect gift giving has on creating relations and bonds between players in GW2 clearly reminds of the effects it has among the Trobriand, the Maori, the Samoan as well as other societies Mauss draws upon in his essay (1990 [1950]). While reciprocation within

Guild Wars 2 may easily be assumed to be motivated intrinsically and thus dependant of the real-life culture of the players, my findings suggest that this is not necessarily the case. When interviewing gamers on this topic, I came across multiple gamers who could inform me that they had *learnt* that reciprocation was *demande*d of them within the game. They reported on stories similar to the one I had experienced myself where they had been made painfully aware of their failure to follow the moral expectations of the game. This points towards a gamer-created culture of reciprocity within Guild Wars 2.

Marcel Mauss' notion of the gift (1990 [1950]) and the duty of reciprocation clearly rings true even within Guild Wars 2. While "the gift" in Mauss' essay refers to the exchange of actual things, women, children, as well as services, invitations to events and play, a virtual world holds different kinds of frameworks within exchange of goods and services with value may occur. Mauss highlights three aspects of gift giving that I propose are also found within GW2, albeit somewhat different: 1. gift giving, 2. the obligation to accept the gift, and 3. The duty to reciprocate the gift. The above analysis regards only the gift giving that involves virtual goods rather than services. Although the giving of virtual goods often is reciprocated with services (typically assistance in quests or dungeons), this demand for reciprocation is lifted once the service is done. In other words: accepting a gift demands equal reciprocation rather than initiating a contest in which the parties continually increase the value of the gift or service given. It also typically only concerns two players at a time rather than making whole guilds or groups of players responsible.

In contrast, single players, when gaming with a group, often commit their entire group to helping others simply by starting to help. This happened quite often during my time in the field. On an otherwise uneventful gaming night during my fieldwork, I was working towards map completion along with Tyeson Manella, a character/gamer I had just met. We had completed the same three renown hearts at the same time and decided to join forces since it was obvious that we worked towards the same goal. At the time Lani Medusa was on level 61 playing in a zone intended for the levels 60 -70. Tyeson Manella was on level 62. Although we technically were on a zone intended for our levels, we found our skills lacking. Especially since we had both gained access to the zone from the north, while the lower level quests were in the southern part of the zone. Teaming up, the quests became more manageable than they would have been if we had gone at them separately. Still though, the *hero challenges* were real challenges even if we had teamed up. At one point while battling a *veteran giant* we were both in a downed state with little prospects of gaining back our health points. We had almost given up the quest when a group of characters went by us. The group consisted of five

characters with levels well over level 80.³⁷ Four of them passed us, but the fifth stopped and helped, reviving first me and then Tyeson Manella, all the while fighting off the giant. Not more than fifteen seconds later, the rest of the group joined the fight. Only a few seconds later, the beast was defeated, and all of a sudden, all seven characters stood still seemingly waiting for something. Having been in this situation before, I knew what was expected of me and typed “thx for helping!” in the chat. None of us moved. A few more seconds went by before also Tyeson typed a simple “ty [thank you]”. As by command, the group instantaneously continued their journey without a word in the chat. It seemed clear that they were only awaiting a “thank you” in return for their favour to us before continuing with their original plans.

On other occasions, I was a part of the group that was expected to help others because someone in the group had helped first. In those cases, I noticed a tendency that the first player to help later thanked the group for joining. The gift he had given a stranger was also given him by his teammates. On the other hand, I have also witnessed the opposite: the second or third responder thanking the first responder for reminding them to stop and help, although this happened only a handful of times during my time in the field, while the other way was something I witnessed at least weekly. When discussing these events with my ARG informants, one of the most common reasons for players to stop and help complete strangers was one of moral obligation: “I was a noob once, and ppl [people] helped me, now its my turn”, “if I can, I always help. Next time Im the one who needs help”. On the case of helping a player who is helping another player, gamers responded with “I cant be any less now can i?”, “we would have had to wait for him anyhow, so we might as well chip in, any less would just be wrong” and “imo [in my opinion] its annoying when the plan gets tossed, but I get it, we all need help”. On another occasion where the first responder was berated for stepping in, he responded “well sue me, I want to be a decent human being”. These statements and my findings closely match Marcel Mauss’ illustration of how the obligation to give establishes

³⁷ Upon reaching level 80, further experience is shown numerically as *spirit shards* which replace the level indication next to a characters’ name prior to reaching top level.

Additionally, there may be small statements just below the characters’ names if the player has completed certain *achievements* or completed a certain number of certain actions with his character i.e. “Been there, done that” if the character has completed all zones on the entire map, “Dungeon Master” if having completed 8 explorable dungeons, or even “Slayer” after having killed 2000 players in PvP.

and re-establishes the position of the chiefs among the Indian societies of the American Northwest:

The obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch. A chief must give potlatches for himself, his son, his son-in-law, or his daughter, and for his dead. He can only preserve his authority over his tribe and village [...] if he can prove he is haunted and favoured both by the spirits and by good fortune, that he is possessed, and also possesses it. And he can only prove this good fortune by spending it and sharing it out, humiliating others by placing them “in the shadow of his name” (Mauss 1990:39, original emphasis).

In a similar way, experienced players affirm their elevated position over less experienced players by lending a hand in battle and gameplay in general. While there is a striking resemblance between gamers’ perception of their duty to join a fight if coming across one and the Dayak’s moral obligation to stay for a meal if they have seen it prepared or happen to be present (Mauss 1990:13), another motivation for helping other players became evident after the guild Nightmares of the Dead (NoD) was split up after an internal conflict. Taril, one of the members who left NoD because of the conflict, joined The Dromedars (TD), where I was a member. On one occasion about a week after he joined TD, Taril helped me with one of the *chapters* from Lani’s *personal story*. The chapter consisted of several quests on multiple zones, and while traveling through zones³⁸ Taril all of a sudden simply stopped, turned around and joined an event we had just passed where only one other player, Manuel Derrick (who seemingly did quite well by himself), was involved. While I thought this was odd to begin with, it became even more strange once I saw that the other character had a higher level than Taril. Upon questioning Taril on the issue later on, he could inform me that Manuel Derrick was one of the players from NoD who had stayed in the guild. Taril “helping” him was a way of belittling him because it implied that he would actually *need* help. While the two players in question made friends again later on (Manuel Derrick left NoD and joined The Dromedars), this incident showed me how reciprocity is sometimes used by players as a way of concealed

³⁸ It is possible to teleport between zones, but this is rather expensive – the most common way to travel long distances is by teleporting to a *waypoint* at the edge of the *zone*, walking through an *azura gate* to a new *zone*, and then teleporting to the opposite end of the new *zone* and so on until one reaches ones’ destination.

resistance among players. As it turned out, this was more common than I had initially thought: After having been made aware of this phenomenon I started noticing how helping other players on similar level sometimes resulted in a “go away” from the player being helped.

That brings me to the last aspect of Mauss’ theory of the three obligations (giving, receiving and reciprocating) that stands without a GW2 counterpart in my thesis thus far: The obligation to receive or accept a gift. While this obligation may be based on a moral expectation to accept a certain gift, be it physical or a service (as with consumables given within dungeons or during dynamic events or the type of “help” described above), within virtual worlds, there is one other aspect to consider. In the example with Lani Medusa, Tyeson Manella, and the group of five helping us, the only way not to accept the help offered us would be to stand still and refuse to take part in the fight, or simply teleporting to a *waypoint* elsewhere. This, of course, would have left our helpers to beat the veteran giant without us. It would, without doubt, have been an easy task between the five of them, but it would also have been considered extremely rude of us to do so and could ultimately have led to our exclusion from guilds or dungeons in the future. The imminent need to cooperate in order to succeed within Guild Wars 2, seems to create general perception among GW2 players that the overall culture of the game must be altruistic, resulting in a moral foundation governing how players interact: Players are regularly kicked out of guilds or parties if they don’t offer, accept or reciprocate help or kindness. Even though cooperation between players is an inherent demand of the game created by the game developers, I argue that reciprocity of services within the game is formed by the gamers themselves as a series of moral rituals in a *response or adaption* to the framework constituted by the game structure.

Chapter 6: The digital human

In this chapter I will highlight some phenomena that emerged during my fieldwork but were somewhat outside of my research question, although relevant to how new players perceive their initial time within the game, and thus also relevant to how we should interpret such perceptions. Although I did not focus on these phenomena specifically during my fieldwork, they presented themselves as important aspects of the game and this chapter thus serves as an overview of themes to further explore within the gaming community in the future.

Avatars, characters and the self

One of the first critical questions aimed at my chosen field of interest was a question of definition: How do you distinguish between a player and his avatar? How about avatar versus character? And more confusingly: Who is really playing the game – the avatar or the person in front of the screen? Or rather who has agency in interactions? Who engages in interactions: Is it the player or the avatar? Selfhood, personhood, identity, avatars, virtual embodiment, non-humans, unhumans, posthumans, gender etc seem to be recurring topics in the study of virtual worlds no matter the main topic of the research project in question or the academic discipline (e.g. Taylor 2006, Boellstorff 2008, Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008, Nardi 2009, Sundén and Sveningsson 2012, Moore 2013). Indeed, entire books have been written about ontology in virtual worlds (Wesch and Whitehead 2012). Gray Graffam (in Wesch and Whitehead 2012:134) names “personhood” and “identity” to be “two major themes that emerge from the study of virtual worlds. The topic is also quite central to social anthropology in general³⁹ It was no big surprise then, that this topic quickly emerged within my own fieldwork.

³⁹ See for example:

Brenner, S. (1996). "Reconstructing self and the society: Javanese Muslim women and "the veil." *American Ethnologist* **23**(4): 673.

Carsten, J. (2004). *After kinship*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

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Moore, H. L. (1994). *A passion for difference : essays in anthropology and gender*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Warrier, M. (2006). "Modernity and its imbalances: Constructing modern selfhood in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission." *Religion* **36**(4): 179-195.

The avatar

As explained in chapter 2, the very first things to consider once entering Guild Wars 2, are in regard to character creation, or the creation of ones' avatar. One must choose a race, gender, body shape and colour, facial features, hair or coat as well as profession, clothing, etc.

Because this represents all players' first interaction with Guild Wars 2, I was curious as to how players created their avatars. I especially wondered whether there was a difference between creating the first character versus the second or third.

[Lani Medusa]

Topic of the week: How did you go about creating your avatar, and would you do it differently if creating a new character today?

[Yantham]

Yantham is not my first character, so I dunno if relevant, but my guild needed scholars, so that's what I did.

[Andrea Fury]

Dom helped me. I'm quite pleased with my character, actually. I don't think I would change anything now. In the beginning I wanted to change professions, though.

[Lani Medusa]

Yantham: what kind of character did you play before?

[Brian Sevardorin]

I actually made my character as kind of a joke. Didn't think I would enjoy playing with a thief asura. They're kind of awkward and funny looking, but I actually quite like it. Everyone else are humans, so I feel kinda special. lol

[Yantham]

I played the boring vanilla: male human soldier. That was my first. I also played a charr engineer once, but the feline thing was just weird... The armour seems to be created for humanoids, so it looks a bit odd on charr and asura.

[Fang]

Am I the only one actually looking like my avatar..? I simply chose looks and attributes based on myself.

[Onacia]

I kindof look like my avatar. But my avatar is better looking, I guess. LOL.

The discussion went on for several days, with even more people joining in. As it turns out, gamers within GW2 create their avatars in many different ways. Creating one's avatar almost

“by chance” seems to be as common as creating it specifically to meet the needs of guilds or personal goals within the game. There is also great variation as to the extent to which gamers base their avatars’ looks and attributes on their real-life personhoods. So even though the avatar is a representation of a real-life self within a virtual world, it is not necessarily an accurate representation.

The word “avatar” originally comes from Sanskrit, referring to “a god’s embodiment on Earth”(Boellstorff 2008:128, Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2012). As Boellstorff points out however, “while “avatar” [...] historically referred to incarnation – a movement from virtual to actual – with respect to online worlds it connotes the opposite movement from actual to virtual” (Boellstorff 2008:128). Even so, the relationship between a player and his avatar is not necessarily one of pure representation even if the actual self is re-embodied within a virtual world (Graffam in Wesch and Whitehead 2012:144). As illustrated by the chat excerpt above, the avatars created within Guild Wars 2 may be created in a number of ways emphasizing different aspects of their looks, clothing and skills depending on the players intentions, experience, his understanding of *his own* personhood and *the characters’* personhood, as well as his understanding of the game and how it is played. Some players put a lot of effort and thinking behind the creation of their character, while others hurry through the process when starting the game and give little to no attention to their avatar during gameplay, focusing primarily on the gameplay itself and only making changes to their avatar as the game demands it⁴⁰. Nonetheless, “avatars make virtual worlds real, not actual: they are a position from which the self encounters the virtual”(Boellstorff 2008: 129).

As previously noted, one player account may include several characters within GW2. Although some switched between avatars frequently depending on the needs of their guild at that moment in time, most players had one main character who they played with. Because of this, there seldom was confusion around who was who within a guild. Even if a player had changed characters, the account name is still visible to guild mates, indicating who is controlling the avatar. Of course, one may never really be sure of who is controlling an avatar even if one recognizes the account name. Although I did not come across it during my

⁴⁰ I.e. changing equipment and clothing when one has “outgrown” the previous equipment in terms of level and strength. When Lani was on level 50 for example, it would have been foolish to use a great sword with a level requirement of level 30 if I had somehow received or purchased a great sword with a level requirement of level 50. Typically, weapons and other equipment on a higher level are more effective because they give a higher boost in [attributes](#).

fieldwork, avatar sharing seems to be quite common within other virtual worlds (Taylor 2006, Boellstorff 2008, Nardi 2009, Moore 2013). Although my findings concerning avatars and personhood were quite sparse, these topics are highly discussed within virtual anthropology in general. In addition to the question of how gamers relate to their avatars, another topic regarding avatars seems to emerge in practically every study of sociality in virtual worlds. Namely: gender.

Gender

The notion of gender when talking about avatars is tightly connected to the notion of gender stereotypes and how these are reproduced within a virtual world. In previous chapters I have already touched upon some of the phenomena I will further explore here.

Even before starting my fieldwork one of the questions I was asked regarding my choice to do in-world fieldwork was how I planned to gather background information about my informants when all I could see was their character. The typical real-life attributes such as gender, skin colour, hair colour, height and age as well as language and dialect would be completely hidden from me. At the time I argued (incorrectly) that these factors would have little to no value for the players themselves, and thus should not be of importance to me as a researcher either. In hind-sight this, of course, could not be further from the truth. My assumption that the gaming culture was not concerned with any external world factors was quickly rejected simply because time zones became relevant already on the first day. While it turned out that people are rather quick to reveal what country they reside in, gender was more of a non-topic during my fieldwork. People rarely revealed their gender, and they almost never asked about other players' real-life gender. The chat discourse and player culture is far from gender neutral however. Phrases like "fighting like a girl" and "man up" etc. are common. There also seems to be a general assumption that everyone else playing the game are men IRL even though a lot of avatars are female.

While avatars do not reveal the gender of the player controlling them, avatars within Guild Wars 2 *are* gendered. When choosing an avatar one must decide whether the avatar should be male or female, but no other options are provided. Humans, sylvari as well as norn have bodies that easily give away the avatars' gender unless it is customized by the player to look more androgynous. The male and female avatars of the asura and charr races look more alike and are harder to distinguish between. While the asura may have human-like hair that might be a gender identifier, the charr does not, and so facial features and clothing are the main

factors in determining what gender a charr character has. Still, distinguishing between a male and a female character is seldom an issue.

One of the things I noticed about gender during my fieldwork was that even though the characters in GW2 are gendered, and most of them quite clearly so, many players consider *characters* to be non-gendered when encountering avatars they do not yet know, while assuming the *players* behind the characters are male.

[Lani Medusa]

How about Fentila? He or she?

[Fang]

She's a she even though she plays a he. U know?

[Lani Medusa]

So once you know a persons RL gender, that is what you call him/her?

[Dwaeri]

What? Im not the only girl here!? :P

[Andrea Fury]

Right!? I thought I was the only woman playing for the longest time!

[Fang]

I guess. I think of them as simply no gender at all though. Just a character of sorts. Like, Lani is a woman, but I have always just thought of her as "Lani", but I kindof assumed you were a man until I joined ARG.. Not like actively, but I kindof assume everyone in GW is a man. lol!

[Sveka Hali]

In GW everyone assumes everyone else is a man until otherwise told. It's a mans world.. lol

[Lani Medusa]

How do you mean «no gender at all»?

[Andrea Fury]

I know! People get really surprised if they find out I'm a woman!

[Fang]

Like, I can see she's a she, but she feels like a "Lani"

[Sveka Hali]

I get what Fang is saying here. Like the character itself feels non-gendered. Its just a tool like a pawn in a game of chess. But once you know who is controlling the pawn, it becomes the gender of the person behind it.

Even though my ARG informants seemed to agree on this topic when asked about it, I noticed how they often used the characters' pronoun when talking in the chat about people they knew with other players. I.e. "Fentila" was often referred to as a man even after people had come to know she was actually a woman in real life. When talking about their own characters, players also tended to use their characters genders' pronoun instead of their own. Thus, the characters' gender seems to be more commonly referred to in chat than the players' gender. Still, gender within GW2 is commonly considered not relevant to gameplay even though there is a general assumption that everyone who plays GW2 is a man in real life no matter the characters' gender. During fieldwork I did not experience any gender-bias from the gaming community upon "outing" myself as a woman within GW2, and neither did any of my female informants. This was a rather big surprise to me considering Gray Graffams description of gender bias within World of Warcraft:

Men may be teased about playing a girl, but they are usually taken seriously in terms of play if they are good. Women, however, may find that being identified as a woman in real life means that other players will not listen to your suggestions or follow your lead, even if you are more experienced and a better player than many others (Wesch and Whitehead 2012:136).

What I did find within Guild Wars 2 however, was a more structural gender bias: When creating a new character, the female options clearly promote female characters being "sexy" and their clothing being revealing. The same bias is found among NPCs.

The most common GW2 avatar is what Yantham referred to as "boring vanilla": a male human warrior⁴¹. On a close second comes a female human or norn wearing clothing that barely covers the avatars' bodies or (if the avatar has a soldier profession) armour that conveniently uncovers some areas of the body. Additionally, they typically have large breasts and behinds as well as doll-like facial features. When asking informants why they chose to

⁴¹ <https://www.guildwars2.com/en/news/the-path-to-the-desert-in-numbers/>

create their character with precisely those features, the common response is something along the line of “if I am to stare at a computer screen for hours and hours I might as well look at something nice” and “charr are kinda cool, but theyre kinda ugly too, hence the boring (but easy to look at) human girl”. This seems to be a common response both in Guild Wars 2 and in other MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Gray Graffam himself played WoW first with a male avatar, later switching to a female one, explaining his choice to do so as “Well, the male Draenai [a type of WoW character] is kinda ugly and all, and I just couldn’t stand looking at him” when being asked about it by an informant (Graffam in Wesch and Whitehead 2012:136). In his contribution to the edited book “Human no more” he explains how his choice to change his avatars gender was questioned by an informant, while his real-life sexuality was never questioned. After drawing on Nardi’s similar findings from WoW (Nardi 2009:159) he concludes that “It [the phenomenon of male players playing female characters being common] reflects more what men prefer to watch on-screen while playing the game than some deep-seated aspect of sexuality” (Graffam in Wesch and Whitehead 2012:136). While this matches my findings within Guild Wars 2, other virtual worlds seem to evoke different notions of gender. In *Second Life* gender switching and cross-dressing have entirely different connotations than what seems to be typical for MMORPGs. As Graffam points out: “this experimentation is highly meaningful given some of the main motivations and drivers for playing Second Life, namely dating, romantic relationships, companionship and cybersex” (ibid.). In Guild Wars 2 specifically, and seemingly in MMORPGs generally: while the avatars’ gender and appearance don’t reveal the players’ identities outside of the game, gender and avatar creation is still an interesting factor to consider while doing research within an MMORPG.

Play and work

Although MMORPGs and video games in general are intended to be entertaining, certain aspects of gaming may be considered ‘work’. During fieldwork this became clear to me both personally and through observation of others. As I mentioned in chapter 2, my first week of playing the game I rarely did anything else than slaying centaurs and basilisks. During the first few, or even first 100 kills, the action itself was somewhat exciting and I found myself thoroughly enjoying helping NPCs with different problems, although most seemed to be solved precisely by killing the same type of beasts over and over again. After a couple of days however, this became somewhat tiring. I began wondering whether or not this was all I was to do for the remainder of my fieldwork. I asked myself questions like “Will the entire game be

like this?”, “Will there ever be an end to this?”, and “Why do people find this entertaining and fun?”. I started to get discouraged. Of course, the simple fact that I knew I *had to* play the game for another five months and three weeks didn’t help.

This, of course, is not something the regular new gamer experiences. Other gamers may simply stop playing the game if they find it boring during the first few days of playing. Later in the game however, all players encounter tasks and quest they don’t like doing but must do in order to advance in the game. Even participating in Player versus Player (PvP) and World versus World (WvW) events may seem tiring.

Whether or not something may be considered work or play seems not to be defined by the type of activity. What seems to be important, however is how often the activity is repeated, whether it is a goal in itself or rather a part of a bigger goal, and whether the player at question considers the activity to be fun to begin with, as well as the degree to which the activity may be said to be “serious” or “important”. Nardi differentiates between two types of “work” within “play:

First, play may manifest seriousness and dedication which players refer to as work. Second, play may demand obligatory actions such as farming that are necessary to accommodate the larger play activity – the activity that players find pleasurable (Nardi 2009:102).

Considering the complexity of the game, players may choose from a long list of activities when deciding *how* to play GW2. At some point though, most players will start to pursue bigger goals that require a long list of intertwined activities to be completed. Some of these activities may be less enjoyable than others, resulting in a sense of “work” while playing the game.

Dwaeri, one of my ARG informants, was relatively new to gaming when entering GW2. He started playing the game after an accident had left him unable to attend his work as a gym teacher, leaving him home alone during the day, bored. He joined my research guild already on his second day of playing, and was an active member for about five weeks, playing almost every day before suddenly not logging in for over two weeks. Once he logged back on, I was curious to know why he had been away.

[Lani Medusa]

Hi! Good to see you! How have you been?

[Dwaeri]

Just fine! Anything happen while I was away?

[Lani Medusa]

That's good. We were afraid something had happened to you. In here: same old, same old. :P Where were you?

[Dwaeri]

I was just... not gaming... It started to feel like chore, so I just quit. But I'm back now. :)

[Lani Medusa]

A chore? how come?

[Dwaeri]

Nah, I just felt like I was doing the same thing over and over again. I'm not a quitter though, so I figured I need to finish the PS [personal story] before giving up on the game, lol. Also, I think Ive watched the entire Netflix library twice the last couple of weeks...

[Lani Medusa]

ROFL [rolling on floor, laughing]

[Lani Medusa]

I'm glad you're back, we missed you! :)

While the experience of play as work was not something I focused on during my fieldwork, discovering it was a common phenomenon within GW2 was somewhat reassuring. As previously mentioned, Bonnie A. Nardi's monograph "My Life as a Night Elf Priest"(2009) had been a huge inspiration to me even before starting on my master's degree. In it, Bonnie dedicates an entire chapter to the work-play dichotomy: "Work, Play, and the Magic Circle". Within this chapter she thoroughly deciphers how the typical opposites *work* and *play* not necessarily are opposites at all, especially within virtual worlds.

While I did not specifically focus on this theme during my fieldwork, there were several instances in which I was reminded of Nardi's analysis of the matter. She had found that *work* was often referred to jokingly, in reference as to whether the game or the gamers' outside jobs should be considered *real work*. On one occasion during my fieldwork, Fentila, the leader of *The Dromedars* and a nurse in real life, excused herself from a guild rush she had initiated:

[Fentila]

Sorry guys, gtg [got to go]. I picked up another morning shift at work and need to sleep.. gl [good luck] with the rush, make me proud!

[Franken Blue]

What!?! U have two jobs? I feel betrayed!

In a humouristic way, Franken Blue had implied that Fentilas role within *The Dromedars* was her “work” rather than her expression of “play”. Additionally, “I feel betrayed” signals an expectation that Fentila should treat her in-game “job” as more important than her real-life job. Keeping in mind this was in no way my focus for my study, my findings regarding this topic are rather limited, but still suggest a similar phenomenon to that of Nardi’s study within World of Warcraft. Considering both World of Warcraft and Guild Wars 2 are MMORPGs with similar structures in regard to gameplay (GW2 being largely based on WoW), it may well be argued that Nardi’s findings in World of Warcraft transfer to Guild Wars 2 as well.

Gaming may allow players to take up the challenges and disappointments of contemporary life that eat away at all of us, working through them in fantasy. Rather than “brainwashing,” repetitive player activity suggests a process in which boredom is confronted and transformed in the hospitable environs of a game world. The game conserves socially valued qualities such as perseverance – which players must exhibit in order to undertake repetitive activities like farming [“a lengthy set of repetitive actions with little contingency”] – while at the same time suggesting the fundamental inadequacy of the typical rewards for such perseverance. The often disappointing results of sticking-with-it in real life are critiqued; a deflating end to long toil is eliminated, replaced with rewards that delight, enhance, and create social cohesion – bright glowing things moving players forward in the logic of the game.(Nardi 2009:115-116)

Her words not only encompass the conundrum regarding why people would *want to* perform work-like tasks within a play-oriented context, but also illuminate the very reason why so many people from different geographical, cultural and social contexts choose to spend big parts of their lives within virtual worlds.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and final thoughts

How noobs are welcomed in GW2

Most new players (new to the game or to gaming as such) mostly interact with NPCs during the first few hours of gameplay. After completing the educational part of the game, new players have a tendency to form alliances with each other rather than with more experienced players. They typically form temporary guilds or join open, casual guilds in which they remain indefinitely or until accepted into more prestigious guilds if ambitious enough. Although these first or second attempts at being part of a guild typically gather players of similar game experience, rank within the guilds is most often defined by seniority (in reference to experience rather than age IRL or even in-game) and more importantly performance during guild gameplay. The hierarchy is highly unstable as players join and leave these guilds frequently, and players typically evolve their characters and their own gaming skills differently, resulting in some players advancing at a higher speed than others. The most influential factor when considering how a noob is welcomed, is how far he has come in his journey from noob to gamer (from being a burden to neutral to valuable). This may be measured by how well he performs in gameplay in general, and how well he utilizes his character's *profession skills*, but also whether or not he understands and reproduces the normative characteristics of the social structures within Guild Wars 2. Even though players with different degrees of experience are typically treated differently in terms of what actions and group quests are entrusted them, the difference in how they are treated typically is a matter of more and more inclusion as the player advances.

How noobs are welcomed in other online games

I have been able to analyze certain thematic findings in Guild Wars 2 comparatively to the same thematic findings in other virtual worlds and anthropology in general, but I am rather limited when it comes to a comparison of the general idea of how new players are welcomed in virtual worlds. Still, when describing my research project to people outside of Guild Wars 2, gamers typically answered with a grin and an assumption that I was studying first person shooting games (FPS). In the question of how noobs are welcomed in virtual worlds in general, there seemed to be a dividing line between MMORPGs on one hand and multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA) and multiplayer first-person shooter games (FPS) on the other in how they are *expected to* welcome new players. The former is considered to have more welcoming communities whereas the latter is commonly known for having harsher cultures

where being insulted over open chat is common. When further pressing my informants (both within Guild Wars 2 and informants who did not play GW2) about this issue, it became clear that this difference, at least partly, has a structural causality. In MOBAs, one of my informants could tell me the success of the team largely depends on the worst player, resulting in new players regularly being textually yelled at in the open chat. In FPS games on the other hand, the best player is typically most influential on the outcome of the game. This puzzled me for a while. Could there be other reasons why both MOBAs and FPSs were considered equally hostile by gamers? One possible explanation was presented to me by my husband based on his gaming experience within the FPS series Battlefield. FPS games, he could tell me, are high-paced, giving little to no room for chat during game play. The exception is when one's character dies, and the game is paused for about 15 to 20 seconds before the character (now alive and well) is placed back into the game but at a different location than before. This pause in gameplay is typically the only time in which players use the chat function in the game to scold other players. Additionally, I have been told that the FPS-players who are most aggressive textually, are the ones who have the highest rank at the end of the game. These statements suggest an increasing aggressiveness among players of higher levels in general, as well as among players with looser relational ties to their peers than those I have discussed in this thesis. While these theories are speculative at best, they point towards interesting topics for future research.

Concluding thoughts

As previously explained, Guild Wars 2 is designed to be an explicitly social game. It was precisely because of this that I chose the game as my field of study. I assumed it would be the perfect place to study social interactions between gamers within the digital, gaming realm. Although this was partly true, it also made it quite hard distinguishing between which aspects of the sociality were constructed by the game developers and which aspects were “naturally” occurring ones within the game culture. Of course, this issue opens up for an even wider question of how, if at all, “nature” and “culture” can be defined within virtual worlds. Initially, I questioned if MMORPGs may be regarded as societies or ‘cultures’, or whether they are places of play and interaction without their own cultural context, only defined by the players’ own real-life cultural contexts. Although my findings don’t give an absolute answer to this question, they do identify some aspects of sociality within virtual worlds that are brought into being by the gamers themselves, creating, if not a culture without impact from

the virtual world structure or real-life cultures, then at least a place of play with its own social structures and moral performances governing sociality and play.

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