



## Do those who play together stay together? The World of Warcraft community between play, practice and game design

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### **Abstract**

*In a time when video games are commonly blamed for anything from antisocial behavior, to the isolation and alienation of their users Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games have developed to provide one of the ultimate online social experiences. Based on cooperation, coordination and communication among players, these games do more than simply provide entertainment: they foster communities, not only allowing trust and friendship to be born, but actively encouraging it. In fact, one of the main secret behind the success of this kind of game appears to be its capacity to stimulate interaction and bonding around a common goal for its players. This paper focuses on one of the world's most popular MMORPGs, World of Warcraft, specifically on studying the characteristics of the community of play and practice built around it and on the influence the game architecture has on the survival potential of said WoW community. In order to achieve these goals, I have conducted a qualitative research at the height of the game's popularity (2011) , conducting interviews with experienced, mostly hard-core and pro players and followed up with half of the original respondents four years later (in 2015), to see how their views on the gaming experience have evolved and to try to understand why the once flourishing WoW community seems to have started its decline.*

### **Keywords**

*Community of play, community of practice, World of Warcraft, MMORPG, gaming community*

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## Introduction

As soon as the internet was born, people started using it for two of society's favorite activities: playing and socializing. In no time at all, they combined the two, creating rudimentary, forum-like websites called Multi-user dungeons, where players from all over the world could come together, create characters and have imaginary text-based adventures with each other. Even though these MUDs were rudimentary from a graphical point of view, in comparison with the already more evolved single player (or multiplayer with 2-8 people) videogames available at the time, they provided a different, very powerful incentive for users: the thrill of interacting and bonding with many new people over exciting adventures of their choosing. Then, in what seems to be the blink of an eye, these text based games, whose sole graphic was that of the forum which supported them and the imagination of the players, turned into complex 3D virtual worlds (Nagy & Koles, 2014), such as massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), where millions of people play together in fairy-tale like surroundings, put together by hundreds of technicians and artists.

In time, these games have grown to the size of small countries, World of Warcraft, for example, hosting no less than 12 million players at its peak<sup>2</sup>, in 2011. At the same time, along the years, players have become more and more specialized; many of them have spent thousands of hours trying to master the synthetic world (Castronova, 2005) and to achieve a better position in the game social hierarchy. Strategies have been devised for optimizing one's performance and there are thousands of official and unofficial websites where they are explained, because committed MMORPG players want to know how to constantly improve themselves and are more than willing to share this knowledge with others. And since many play this game in the company of offline or "real life" friends and family or meet up offline with other players they have met in the game, the offline world sees its large share of MMORPG talk as well. Gamers get together with fellow MMORPG-playing friends, either informally, in places such as pubs or at official Conventions organized annually by game producers in order to discuss their hobby, compare achievements and find out tips on how to improve. Hierarchies are developed, "pros" are revered and "noobs" are mocked, all while using a rather complicated jargon and a large number of inside references and jokes.

Many researchers lift a disbelieving eyebrow when they hear about online communities (ex. Poster, 1995), even more so when it comes to gaming communities. Still, what these players seem to have built over the years is a stable, durable community of play and practice, one the kind of which has just begun to be thoroughly studied, despite the more vast literature on other kinds of virtual worlds. It is true that MMORPGs are, essentially, virtual worlds – immersive 3D places that users can explore, perform actions and interact with each other in (Nagy & Koles, 2014). However, not all these worlds are the same or foster the same kind of community. For example, one of the best known such entity is Second Life – a life simulator, where millions of users would

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<sup>2</sup>The moment with the greatest number of subscriptions up to this day

interact, visit venues, play, party, buy, sell, create and even work in order to earn game currency. Although at a glance, this might seem similar to an MMO, it must be noted that such simulators are not games per se, as there are no set objectives or tasks, no way to objectively quantify performance and no official reward system, but they are rather really complex chat rooms, which serve as a wonderful environment to be social in and a true identity playground. Extensive research performed on Second Life (Boellstroff, 2008; Gotschalk, 2010) shows a great preoccupation for self-presentation, a high degree of identification with one's avatar and a propensity of the users to create an alternate life and identity for themselves within the virtual world.

MMORPGs, however, are games – complete with missions, goals, rewards, items and objectives and this is very important for their players. While the social aspects are crucial here as well, they are highly blended with the practice of playing. Although some feeble traces of behavioral changes due to avatar choices, called the Proteus effect, have been noticed (Yee et al 2009), identification with the avatar is generally low in game and players seem more preoccupied with achievement and building a reputation than with reinventing themselves or trying on new identities. That is why I believe the existing literature on virtual worlds such as Second Life has little explanatory power for the way communities, cultures and social ties are built in MMORPGs, genre which warrants its own specific studies. Excellent such specific research was conducted by authors such as Pearce (2009) or Corneliussen & Rettberg (2008) (the latter is actually a study of WoW). However, most studies, such as those above, lose sight of the blended nature of play and practice of MMORPG – fostered communities and do not focus enough on the significant role the actual game architecture and design plays in the generation, maintenance and eventually, dissolution of these communities. That is why, in this paper, I have studied and described the WoW community in connection with these concepts and attempted to explain its trajectory in time based on them.

In order to achieve this objective, in 2011, I have conducted a first set of in-depth interviews with 10 experienced and dedicated WoW players (most of them hard-core or pro), who were able to provide me with an expert view on the matter at hand. Then, in 2015, I conducted another set of interviews with five of the original respondents, to identify the changes that have occurred in the community and the players' view of the game in the meantime. I have also conducted eight years' worth of participatory observation in the game, which I myself have played, ranging from casual, to hard-core, between 2005-2013. This technique of studying the game from the inside in order to gain a better understanding of its many specifics has been practiced for some time by researchers who even created guilds of social scientists who played the game for both amusement and science (Mortensen, 2008), employing a technique called autoethnography (Arnold, Smith & Trayner, 2008).

## The WoW community through a theoretical lens

### *Studying the community*

Before attempting to analyze the characteristics of the WoW community – or any other one, for that matter – the meaning of the concept itself must be clarified, along with the elements that comprise it, which will be examined in this paper, in order to determine if one can truly speak of community in the case of WoW players and if so, what its particularities would be. Although it represents one of the fundamental notions in sociology, the term “community” has never been defined in a satisfactory manner (Bell & Newby, 1974), which led to a great number of rather different definitions, according to each social scientist’s paradigm, vision and field of study. Van Dijk (2007) has studied multiple such definitions, in order to isolate a common denominator. He succeeded in identifying four common characteristics of all types of community, be it online or offline: **a composition of members who perform specific activities; a social organization that comprises structure, hierarchy and a set of common rules; a common language and certain specific patterns of interaction and a common culture and identity.**

In order to demonstrate the fact that a game such as World of Warcraft can and does foster a true community, further within this paper, I will identify and describe these main elements within the WoW community.

### *Community of play or community of practice?*

The term “community of practice” is a relatively new one in the field of social sciences. It was coined in the 1990s by cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger to describe an age old reality. Initially, this concept was developed in the field of the learning theory, but since then, it has found applications in a large number of other areas, such as education, government, organizational networks, professional associations and more. As defined by Wenger, “*Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.*” (Wenger, 2006). In the author’s opinion, for a group to constitute a community of practice, it must meet three main criteria: it must have a domain of activity (the respective field of practice), the members must form an actual community by interacting frequently and bonding among themselves and they have to practice the activity the group is centered around together. Also, members learning from each other and helping each other improve is a substantial aspect of this concept.

Pearce (2009) defines communities of play in a very similar manner to Wenger’s communities of practice: as groups of people who bond over playing a certain game together. The difference, in her opinion, between the two classifications is that while in the case of the community of practice, emphasis falls on the practice itself (i.e. the game); communities of play are much more focused on the interaction and cooperation among the players than on achieving the official purpose of the game. Thus, a computerized adventure becomes merely an excuse for the players to cooperate, to size

each other up, to exchange stories about their in-game or offline lives or simply to do something fun together as they would if they were face to face. The social side is highly emphasized, the author going as far as to oppose the concept of community of play to that of community of practice, even though she is aware that play can easily be regarded as practice. However, in her opinion, in the case of the communities of practice, accent falls on the performed activity, while in the case of communities of play, it is the togetherness and cooperation that counts, regardless of the performed activity in itself. In support of this affirmation, she brings her study of a community of URU (an MMORPG) players who, upon finding out their game was closing down, found a new virtual world to migrate to and resumed their community in the new game, surviving and adapting to the transition as a group, while at the same time, maintaining a sense of identity and specific rituals and manifestations of their former “homeland”, situation which made the author liken them to a group of refugees and dub them “the URU Diaspora” (Pearce, 2008). However, it can be argued against this theory that the URU players didn’t see fit to go and resume their community on a forum or a role playing site, or over Skype conferences, they chose other MMOs, which were really similar to the one they had just left so one could say the practice itself must have had some sort of influence.

From my own observations and from the stories of my respondents, I would conclude that WoW players form, at the same time, a community of practice and one of play, as both social and practical aspects seem to be not only important, but also inseparable in the minds of players, especially when it comes to more experienced ones. I would say that the WoW community is somewhere on the continuum between play and practice, as different types of players are more attracted to one aspect or the other. Thus, considering Bartle’s (1996) theory regarding the four main kinds of gamers: achievers, socializers, explorers and killers, which also seems mostly applicable to MMORPGs such as WoW (Yee, 2006), it is natural for achievers and killers to be more goal-oriented, while socializers and possibly explorers would be more socially oriented. However, when it comes to WoW, at least the way things were at the height of its glory, cooperation and achievement were so tightly interwoven that achievers can hardly achieve without cooperating with capable, trustworthy individuals they made a good team with and socializers could find the best opportunities for bonding, cooperating and connecting with other players in the heat of combat, fighting by each other’s side to achieve great victories.

### **Who are the MMORPG players – a socio-demographic profile**

Many regard MMORPGs as a trivial entertainment for children and adolescents. However, Yee (2006) was among the first to disagree with this common perception. He has studied this genre of games since 1999 and has found that only approximately 25% of the players are teenagers, while approximately 50% of them are working full time, around 36% are married and 22% are even parents. The occupational profile of the players is rather heterogeneous, ranging from high-school students, to corporate employees and

even pensioners. According to Yee's research, conducted on MMORPGS Everquest and later, World of Warcraft, the average player's age is around 25.7 years old.

When it comes to more recent demographics and player information specific to WoW, in 2013, the company Razer has conducted a survey on over 4000 of the players. The main age group, just as Yee (2006) and Castronova (2005) had noted about MMORPGs in general, 20-30 (55%), followed by the 16-20 category (29%). Over half of the respondents had been playing for more than 5 years at the time, about a quarter having played since the launching of the game. Almost 30% of the respondents were dedicating almost a full work week to the game, playing more than 30 hours weekly, while over half (55%) played 10-25 hours per week. When it came to cooperation versus competition, the scales were clearly tipped towards the former, 77% of respondents preferring PVE to PVP. Also, 70% of them agreed that their guild had helped them to learn the game.

In addition, an infographic provided by techeblog.com in 2010 asserts that at that time, one in five WoW players were female and almost half of them (48%) were Asian.

### ***Research findings***

In order to be able to get a better glimpse of the MMORPG universe and community through the eyes of the players, I interviewed 10 gamers who have been playing World of Warcraft (WoW) for a long time (most of them for 5-6 years, which is around the time the game began) and had reached a certain level of knowledge and experience. All of them have at least one maximum level character (most have several), most are hardcore or even pro players (only one is casual, as she plays on role play servers) and they have all dedicated a large portion of their free time to the game. Socio-demographically, their age ranged from 22 to 30, they were mostly students, some of whom were also employed and the gender distribution was 2 females to 8 males (female players are more difficult to come across due to girls' general minority in the game). Some of these players were found directly in-game, as they responded to my call for volunteers for my study, while others were friends or acquaintances of theirs, whom they recommended, using the snowball technique. I met up with each of them in person, outside the game, to talk rather freely (using the semi-structured interviewing technique) about their evolution in WoW, their experiences and their perception of themselves as gamers, the game culture and the larger gaming community and these are the conclusions I have come to:

#### *WoW is a game of teaching, learning and sharing*

"At first, it was very difficult. The game's learning curve is quite abrupt; it takes a really long time to learn and you can't simply learn by yourself. We learnt from each other. I would discover something new and tell my friends <<did you know you could do that?>> and they did the same for me. I would spend hours talking to my friends about the game, both online and IRL, all those discussions were purely educative". (Zigurd, M, 23)

Those who started playing WoW a few weeks after the game first began had no experts to ask so they worked together to discover everything. As soon as a new find had been made or new knowledge had been achieved, it would be shared – at first with one’s gaming friends and with one’s guild mates, then with the rest of the players, via many specially created web forums and community pages, designed to help people improve their game. Although this willingness to spend time and energy openly sharing information with other players one has never even met is not specific to WoW culture, as it seems to be a common practice in the video game culture, it greatly helps bind the community together and foster the defining elements of a community of practice, alongside those of one of play. This practice not only helps establish reputation both in-game and in real life (he/she who posted useful information was regarded at the same time as a highly accomplished player, but also as a generous, helpful individual who others would look up to)

All players give a very similar account of their first encounters with the WoW universe: for the first few months, they found it very confusing, as elements such as the game play itself, the rules of social interaction, the specific jargon were extremely complex. The ones who joined the game later on resorted to the help of the more experienced players, who taught them what to do (either in-game or IRL), what equipment to wear and how to behave properly. This help was crucial in the opinion of all the respondents, and though it usually came from friends, each of the interviewees can recall many occasions when they were alone in game and had questions, so they just asked on the general chat channel and there were almost always a few kind strangers willing to answer them.

Many times, the kindness towards beginners didn’t stop at sharing information with them, as most of the respondents remember having received unexpected and unsolicited gifts of money, useful items or offers to be “boosted”<sup>3</sup> when they first started playing or when they created a new character on another server.

Although it could be argued that such random acts of generosity, as well as the availability for sharing information are a way of strengthening one’s faction and ensuring that more players are skilled and combat ready in a game mostly based on cooperation, usually, WoW players don’t have such things in mind when teaching each other or giving each other a hand. The more plausible explanation is that there is a powerful sense of identity and connection among gamers and a diffuse sense of affection extended to new players, similar to that shown to a younger relative, as they remind the more experienced players of their starting days. Moreover, the unwritten rules of the game say that being helpful to beginners goes as far as being a duty for the “veterans”, as they have surely received help when they were new:

“As others have taught you, it is your duty to teach others in turn” –Zigurd, M, 23.

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<sup>3</sup>The term refers to the practice of a high level character entering a party with a low level one and quickly killing the difficult monsters in a dungeon, so that the boosted player could receive experience and level up faster.

But in this game, learning is not reserved for the beginners, it is a constant activity for those who wish to be taken seriously as players. And exchanging information is the most natural thing. Players are not ashamed to ask others how to improve and not only are the connoisseurs not against answering questions, they often find it flattering when others come to them for advice, as it is a sign of recognition

“I’ve had people ask me things and it really felt good that they came to me and I was able to answer them”- Bocanila, M, 23

A large part of a player’s game information is acquired either by directly asking others, from the constant discussions about the game with other players or from reading and participating in one of the many forums

“I could say that I spend 2 hours playing and 3 hours researching on forums”- Zigurd, M, 23.

Dedicated players admit to spending hours on end researching information about how to improve and agree that this is a requirement for anyone who wants to be anyone in the game, as the mechanics of play are anything but simple. As one player puts it, in many aspects, the game relies on mathematics and one must be able to perform the right equations to determine how to do the most damage to the enemy or how to heal one’s companions properly.

However, refusal to learn or take advice which results in a less than proper game play will immediately turn the guilty player into a target of endless ridicule and marginalization. If dedicated members tend to show understanding to new players, they have a very limited toleration for those who are unwilling to listen and learn. If the term “noob” was originally used to describe a new player, who isn’t yet familiarized with the game, in time, it became an insult directed to those who play badly and who nobody wants to team up with.

”A noob player is one who although isn’t new to the game, doesn’t want to listen to other people’s opinions, does things on his own and does them wrong” (Zigurd, M, 23)

### ***WoW culture as a distinct entity***

One of the main requirements in order to be able to speak about community is that the group in question shares a common culture. Using several definitions of the concept of culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn - 1952, Hofstede – 1994, Matsumoto – 1996, Spencer-Oatey – 2008, cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012), I have chosen a set of defining elements in order to prove its existence and particularity: **the presence of a common language (jargon), common values and norms, a shared history and material and immaterial cultural artifacts (I have chosen fan art to illustrate material artifacts and specific inside jokes to highlight the immaterial ones)**. Although the existence of a specific common jargon is also a defining element of the community, I chose to address it under culture, as it



seemed more fitting to do so, given that both language and common references are cultural facts

### ***Breaking the code: language***

The first cultural element which stands out in all the respondents' stories is the complex jargon used by the players, which is unique to their world and in a great part impossible for outsiders to decipher. Composed largely out of abbreviations, acronyms or even jokes that stuck, the language barrier is the first obstacle a new player has to surpass in order to become a WoW initiate. While for the unadvised person, a phrase like "LFG1M IMBA DPS +350 GS for ICC25, last spot!" would be total gibberish, for the average player, this was clear as day: they were looking for a really good damage dealer to complete their 25 man raid group going to attack the Ice Crown Citadel and in order to be picked, his gear score (calculated automatically according to how good his gear was) had to be over 350.

"It's a whole different language; those who don't play the game would never be able to understand it" (Zigurd, M, 23)

While players who started later in the game development struggled to learn the code, those who had started when the game was new were able to watch as this language changed and evolved before their eyes, as new expressions were added to it and older ones died out.

"When I first started playing, terms like <boost> or <twink> didn't even exist, then, I don't even know since when, everyone started using them. Who knows what they'll come up with until next year?" (Valdreth, M, 30)

But the most interesting part is that most of the respondents confessed to have taken this language out of the game and using it with their friends who play WoW and sometimes even attracting strange stares when they forget and use it by mistake with outsiders. This shows that the players have internalized WoW culture to such a degree that it became a part of their daily lives and identities, the line between their WoW life and their offline one becoming quite blurry at times. This phenomenon seems similar to the way offline groups who spend a large amount of time together in a specific culture and setting behave, for example army men, who still often keep the jargon and habits they have acquired in the military even outside the army base.

### ***Inside jokes***

Humor is a distinctive part of every culture and each community has certain unique elements it finds amusing, leading back to common memories, experiences and references only its members can relate to (Hofstede, 2009). WoW players are no different, although most of them confessed to using a lot of mainstream internet humor with each other; they all have acknowledged that there were an impressive number of inside jokes among players, many in the form of insults and taunts, due to the rather

competitive and boisterous nature of the game. Some of the first that came to their minds were:

“Friends come and go, but epics are soulbound” (Hulkette, F, 24)

“Your momma is so fat it takes 4 warlocks to summon her” (Arcite, M, 28)

But aside from the popular inside jokes that go around, there have appeared numerous funny forms of fan art, such as online comic books (e.g. Dark Legacy, LFG and more) and hundreds of funny music videos called machinima (videos filmed in-game, in which characters are used as actors), usually parodies of famous songs, with lyrics referencing WoW realities and experiences.

### ***A common history***

Most of the players I interviewed believe that there is such thing as a “collective WoW history”, since they have been playing for a long time and the game has gone through an important number of changes since the beginning (including 3 expansions) and there have been many moments or times that the players have found memorable. They still talk, reminisce or exchange stories, for example, about the 40 man raids in “Vanilla” (the first, basic version of the game), of the day a certain patch was released or the first time a certain monster was first killed or how certain game dynamics and practices used to be. Newer players have also come to know some of these stories, having been told about them by the older ones. So even though a player has started out during the second expansion, he still knows about many things that happened during the basic game.

“Everyone knows the story of Leroy Jenkins, the player who was away from the computer when the others discussed raid strategy and when he came back, he just ran into the middle of the mobs [monsters], getting the entire raid killed. Since they were making a video of that raid, everything was caught on film and every WoW player saw it. Now Jenkins is an icon of WoW popular culture” (Hulkette, 24, F)

### ***Cultural artifacts: WoW themed fan art***

Fan art is a set of diverse artistic manifestations, such as drawings, videos, songs, comics, graphic art etc. which the fans of a game or show make as a tribute to it. This phenomenon isn't specific to WoW, or video games for that matter, but there is an immense volume of WoW themed fan art being crated each day.

Although none of the respondents have created fan art themselves, they all know about many forms of fan art (drawings, costumes, machinima, comics, even tattoos), some even using some of them (several use fan drawings as wallpapers for their computers, while others delight in watching funny videos or reading comics about WoW online)

Members of the WoW community spend a great deal of time and effort producing online and offline tributes to their passion. They encompass elements that depict aspects of this society, its norms, experiences and beliefs, transforming into cultural artifacts.

## Values and norms

Common values and norms are at the very heart of both the concept of culture and that of community, since they represent core beliefs and practices that bring like-minded people together and give them a sense of identity and belonging and at the same time, they provide the guidelines for the organization and structuring of the community. That is why special attention will be devoted to this aspect, as it will be examined separately from the previous elements of culture.

Most of the interviewed players were able to identify a set of core values and principles common to the members of the WoW community. The most important three would be dedication, reputation and fairness.

Dedication is not only a highly valued trait among WoW players, it is also the only way to achieve long term success in the game and it is closely connected to the game's motivation and reward system. For one thing, most combat skills require extensive knowledge and dexterity which are gained through repeated practice. For another, especially in the earlier expansions of the game, fighting in dungeons and raids took quite a long time and raids, that would take hours, were planned in advance, as dozens of players from different time-zones and with different schedules were to be coordinated to be online and available at the same time. That meant that if players wanted to raid with the guild (and gain gear, trust, bonding and reputation in the process, they had to be available to play the game a number of nights a week, for a predetermined few hour span. Also, by the game's design, if a player put in enough hours in the game, they would eventually reach maximum level and get a decent gear (Cărtărescu, 2010). From this point of view, Rettberg (2008) calls the WoW system of rewards a "*capitalist fairytale*" (p.20), as it often involves hours upon hours of performing unamusing, repetitive tasks which have a sure and predictable reward at the end, so that anyone willing to put in the work could get far enough ahead in the game. This has been deemed by some theorists (Rettberg 2008, Cărtărescu 2010) as a powerful motivation to play the game for those unsatisfied with the perceived unfairness of their offline lives, where effort is not always promptly and equitably rewarded. Basically, being a dedicated player was a sure enough way to become a better, more skilled, more knowledgeable player, with a better gear, which would be more likely to be an asset to the group, while not showing enough dedication could, in a mainly cooperative game such as WoW, represent a setback not only for the player, but for his/her entire team. Also, through this mechanism, a dedicated player was more likely to achieve a good reputation among his/her peers, and reputation is the most prized possession in WoW, especially among hard-core players, while "slacker" is one of the most common insults in the game.

In WoW, there is a very strong relationship between dedication, reputation and property. To a WoW player, property is very important and high level gear items (good epic and legendary items, advanced class item sets etc.) are the most important kind of property there is.

“this game relies a lot on what you’re wearing and what others can see you’re wearing, that is how the game was built, what you’re wearing matters (Zigurd, M, 23)  
“Skill is acquired in time, the more you play, the better you get at it, but once you have the skill, the thing that makes the difference is the equipment and again, the more you play, the better equipment you will get” (Bulah, M, 24)

These items are a crucial extension of the character (Rossi, 2009), determining a great part of its power and abilities and implicitly, they are a part of the player’s digital body (Gottschalk, 2010; VanDoorn, 2011). All players covet high-end items and regard obtaining them as one of the main goals in WoW, as they don’t only greatly improve their game, but they’re also a status symbol, confirming their skill and granting them reputation. However, property is simply the means to the aforementioned ends and not one of the players’ core values in itself.

Of course, reputation is reserved for those items that are very difficult to obtain, that players cannot buy, receive as a gift or earn by doing repetitive tasks (grinding) and they can only get by participating in defeating extremely difficult enemies themselves. The items one can get by grinding (that can be bought for PVP honor points for example), do not have the same standing with players, being deemed “welfare epics” (Paul, 2010). And, in order to gather all the right weapons and equipment, one must play for a long time, achieve many tasks and kill many monsters. Really good items, called “epic items” can only be obtained from monsters that are really hard to defeat, which one usually needs a team of 10 to 25 people for. And one of these monsters only randomly drops a few items out tens of possible ones. These items are only useful to certain players, depending on their class and even among those who can use them, some have a well determined priority, depending on who would mostly benefit from it so it. So one must kill the monster many times before the right items drop and he/she finally has priority to them. When taken into consideration that only serious, dedicated, well equipped players get to be taken along to be part of hard battles (raids), one must put a lot of time and effort to acquire the proper skill and equipment to be eligible for harder and harder battles. The equipment (formed of 19 distinct pieces) needs constant improving as the player progresses in the game and it becomes harder and harder to obtain. Due to their distinctive appearance and great social value, players can recognize players wearing high-end epics at a glance, making the wearer the target of public admiration.

Achieving a good reputation and thus, the respect of other gamers is the ultimate goal that most WoW players are striving for and also an important motivation for playing the game, as in the offline world, many of the best gamers are mostly unknown, with few claims to fame, while in-game, they can become the stuff of community legend. Also, WoW reputation can seep into the offline world, via means such as gaming videos, gaming conventions etc. In a place where battle is at the center of the action, rather “military” values such as loyalty, honor and team spirit also play an important role and contribute highly to the way one is regarded by others. A player’s reputation is his/her business card and a guild’s reputation sometimes expands to its individual members, gaining them respect among the others.

“Just like in real life, where your status matters, you want to be the best at what you do in game and be someone in this virtual society, it is the ultimate purpose” (Unx, M, 25)

Another one of the highest held in the players’ value system would be a sense of justice and fairness. These are dedicated players who have put in time and effort into building their status and reputation, into securing a decent gear and earning a large amount of money and other valuable possessions. They don’t appreciate those who try to cut in line and jump straight ahead by buying equipment with real money or buying a character which is already at maximum level from others. That is why one of the most hated kind of player is the ninja, the one who steals items which aren’t rightfully his according to priority or cheats when trading with other players. Although this is the most commonly encountered crime in the WoW universe, it rarely happens, because players value their reputation and know they would be ostracized if caught ninja-ing items

“A player who has played for a long time and has worked for everything he/she has in game will never be happy when another player will get everything he has instantly, just by paying some real life money for it, there is a feeling of injustice there” (Zigurd, M, 23)

Unexpectedly, competition is openly valued by some of the respondents, but most declare that they only compete with themselves, in order to become the best they can be and take no particular satisfaction in surpassing others.

“The competition is mostly with yourself, you try to improve and be the best you can, each gamer plays at his/her own level and possibilities” (Bocanila, M, 23)

Judging from my own observations and the respondents’ described gameplay, WoW players are, in fact, a very competitive lot, as most of the hard-core players have installed special add-ons (called DPS/Healing meters) that let them know how every member of their group is performing in combat and many of their conversations revolve around this topic. Players brag often about how they scored above the others on the DPS/Healing meter and mercilessly tease each other for performing poorly. It seems, then, that pretending not to value competition excessively seems to be the socially acceptable thing to do. This probably stems from the fact that the game is cooperative and team spirit should, in theory, be more important than individual performance (a “helpful” player shouldn’t mock those who perform poorly, he should help them improve, for the good of the group). However, since it is a game after all, especially when it comes to more committed players, many of them secretly wish to be better than the rest.

When it comes to unwritten rules, most of the interaction between players happens by norms the players have negotiated and are constantly negotiating among themselves. Sometimes even so much so that the game developers have watched a set of norms and practices emerge and become universally adopted by the players and decided to transform them into official, game rules:

“for example, when having to share loot, we would type “n” (for need) if we needed to equip the item and “g” (for greed), if we wanted it for selling, then if several people or no one at all needed it, we would use a special code to roll a dice for it; after about a year, Blizzard caught on and installed need roll and greed roll buttons, that work automatically when clicked” (Hulkette, F, 24)

When it comes to a code of conduct, there are many specific etiquette rules, which some of the respondents consider to be “common sense”, but others had to learn, such as the fact that if somebody puts a beneficial spell on you, it is polite to return the favor and put a beneficial spell back on him/her. Also, the fact that one isn’t allowed to ninja is an unwritten rule, as game makers usually have no involvement in settling these issues (the theft cannot be proved).

People in WoW tend to obey these rules closely, despite the fact that there is usually no authority to catch punish them. According to the respondents, they are more prone to obey the rules than people usually are in the offline world. The reasons they believe are behind this is that many of the people who play this game which is ultimately based on cooperation are more pro-socially prone and that a good reputation is more valuable to one in game than the material possessions one could steal. The social control also seems to be tighter, as if one belongs to guild and offends another player, he/she can complain to the offender’s guild master and he could get expelled from the guild. Also, a wrong doer can be publicly denounced on General Chat (a communication channel all players can read and write in) and no one will want to play with him anymore.

Deviance from these norms and values in itself can also be seen as a positive thing for the community though, as it helps increase group solidarity in opposition to the deviants (Smith 2010).

It must be noticed that some of the players ‘most important values and norms are, in fact, strongly influenced by the architecture of the game. Taking dedication for example, it is only so important to the players because the game is designed in such a way as to keep the players online for as long as possible. This suggests that the game structures and requirements have a significant impact on the way the community is shaped and the players’ values and behaviors are molded. This points to a reciprocal influence between designer-imposed gameplay and community-generated practices and norms, as it was shown above that WoW creators are careful to often incorporate player norms as official practices and regulations.

### **Gaming and identity**

When it comes to identity, most of the interviewed WoW players have a deeply rooted sense of belonging to a broader community. In fact, they spontaneously used the word “community” to describe the larger group of players they belong to. However, I have found that a gamer identifies on several levels which intersect each other.

First and foremost, WoW players identify with the online and offline group of closer friends he/she plays with on a regular basis, with whom the ties of affection are the strongest and to whom they can relate the best. Then, for some of the players it

seemed important to identify with or quite contrary, reject the other players from his/her country of provenience. Either way, another part of the player's gamer identity is shaped in relation to his/her offline homeland and they are also hetero-identified with that group. There are even circulating stereotypes among players such as "the French can't tank" or "the Swedish are stupid" or "the Portuguese are really good players".

"It's even funny how many stereotypes there are, some even about the nationality of the player, such as <French can't tank>, <Spanish can't heal>, the first thing I was asked when joining one guild was whether I was French, I said <no>, they said <Ok, then you're in!>" (Zigurd, M, 23)

For most of the people interviewed, being in a Romanian guild proved to be an important starting point and to give them a deeper sense of belonging when they first joined the game but after a while, the importance of the national identity gave way to the development of a more unspecific WoW player identity, having more to do with the acquired skills and with the preferred gaming style (casual, hard-core, role play, PVE, PVP etc.), the player gravitating towards a guild which shares these characteristics. Soon, the gamer will start to develop a feeling of belonging to his/her guild.

"In the beginning, I met a Romanian guild, we didn't know each other but we knew we were Romanian so we stuck together, helped each other and it was a very cool environment, we reached maximum level together, then we went our separate ways" (Bulah, M, 24)

At the same time, the interviewed players feel that they have things in common with the rest of the WoW players in general, the most noted things being sharing a passion for the Fantasy universe and for gaming, sharing a more relaxed attitude towards life and even a specific sense of humor, some even found that they have similar taste in TV shows or music with many of the other players.

Having a gamer identity is a reason for pride for some of the interviewed WoW players, as it is something they excel at and at the same time, something they perceive as being "cool"

"I feel proud, because I've been doing it ever since I was a kid, I've been part of the [WoW] community and have earned my place in the game" (Arcite, M, 28).  
"WoW is rising, more and more people are playing and suddenly, being a gamer is not seen as a waste of time anymore, it's become popular, like a sport" (Unx, M, 25)

For others, being a gamer is as much a part of who they are like being an avid reader or a Tolkien fan, they never stopped to ask themselves how this will make them look in the eyes of other people, it was just a part of them.

"Being a WoW player is a part of who I am, just as much as being fond of reading or being a philosophy student or a role player. It's just one of my personal coordinates" (Carmylla, F, 24)

### ***What's in a name?***

Surprisingly, all the users confess to many times calling their gaming buddies by their main characters' names even if they are standing face to face and have known each other's real names for years. This happens even more when it comes to people they have met in game and after that in real life. As one player explains,

“Each gamer has a gamer tag, a name we use among us and everyone knows him by, I call my friends by their main character's names all the time, even on the phone or face to face” (Zigurd, M, 23)

A player's best known in-game name is more than just a nickname, it is a mark of his gamer identity, charged with all the implications of his/her online persona: reputation, character history etc., as it is also a sign of belonging to a certain community, it's the name “all the guys know him by” and even if a select few know his real name, many times they choose to use the nick as a reference to a common identity and practice.

### ***How gamers see themselves: an average WoW player's portrait***

“When you take a person and put it in the community, the recipe for success is for that person to already be similar to the other people there, there is a profile one must have in order to fit in, after that, he/she will learn all he/she needs to know and will be alright” (Unx, M, 25)

Most respondents are aware that there is a cultural stereotype regarding gamers in general and WoW players – as members of the largest and best known MMO community – in particular and they partially adhere to those stereotypes themselves, especially when it comes to the physical and socio-demographic aspects. Thus, they described the average WoW player as being a male in his mid-twenties, mostly a student and usually in a rather poor physical condition, due to the many hours spent in front of the computer and the junk food ingested while playing.

However, WoW players are generally bothered by the negative way they are portrayed in the media and regarded by non-gamers, especially when it comes to the assumption that they have no friends or activities outside of the game and that they are generally social outcasts. Although a great part of this prejudice is common towards gamers in general, it is more accentuated – especially the assumption of computer addiction and lack of offline achievements and of a social life – towards WoW players, as (possibly due to heavy media exposure of a few tragic cases of death or injury brought about by excessive WoW playing), they are regarded as highly immersed and as spending too much time in the game. The players themselves strongly reject the popular stereotype that regards them as “nerds”, “geeks”, “perpetual teenagers”, “computer addicts” and “people who don't have a social life”, stating that they are no less integrated than a dedicated sports fan or someone who is playing in a music band. Thus, in their opinion, the average WoW player is a funny, laid-back guy with little interest for



grand achievements in the offline world. His hobbies usually include playing video games, watching comedy series, reading web comics and funny websites and reading SF Fantasy novels – activities considered “geeky in a good way” by the respondents.

There is definitely also a recognizable common culture shared by WoW-ers outside the game as well, as the respondents pointed out, a culture many were part of before WoW even existed. This indicates that Yee (2005) was most likely correct in his assumption that people who start playing this game are already preselected to have things in common, though it is not unlikely that their tastes may become even more similar after joining the community, from interacting and exchanging information and preferences with one another.

“We all watch the same TV Shows, we like the same movies, the same web sites, we have common interests” (Bulah, M, 24)

Though the usual “gamer outfit” is anything casual, usually jeans and large T-shirts, some of the respondents even pointed out a growing tendency for gamers to purchase and wear distinctive articles of clothing as a sign of belonging to their group:

“You can tell one’s a WoW player right away if he’s wearing a WoW Blizzard [the company that produced the game] T-shirt” (Bulah, M, 24)

Although most respondents fit this profile almost perfectly, objectively speaking (minus the girls, gender-wise), when asked whether they identify with this portrait, they tended to regard themselves as somewhat superior to the standard, either more physically fit, with more diversified interests, more ambitious and successful or more outgoing. An explanation for this is probably a simple case of illusionary superiority, a very common social bias.

From a gaming point of view, they also situated themselves close to pro on a pro-noob axis (pro being the best player and noob, the worst), but this could also be because the interviewed players had years of experience and achievements behind them and were indeed very capable.

The respondents could portray the average player without much difficulty, however, they emphasized that they have met all sorts of people in the game, of all ages, natures and professions and that it is mostly a diverse society, united around a common passion and practice.

### **Social aspects and hierarchies**

“The social aspect is the most important, the main idea, without it, the game would have no success, playing alone is pointless” (Bocanila, M, 23)

If one thing is true in the mind of the average WoW player it’s that the game would be rather pointless if played alone. One of the greatest satisfactions the game can provide is finally managing, after many attempts and challenges, to achieve a hard victory while

working together with a group of (in-game/real life or both) friends. As Chen (2009) points out, even repeated failed attempts at defeating an enemy with your guild can be regarded as a success rather than a failure, as it helped the players bond, improve their coordination and their skills, bringing them closer to victory and in the end, it provided them with good fun in trying. Yee (2005) also shows that in environments such as MMORPGs, bonds, trust and friendship are created in a similar way to the way it happens in the military, as people get to know and trust each other better when placed in stressful combat situations, where they have to work together and protect each other in order to succeed.

All of the interviewed players consider that the entire fun of the game comes from its social nature, the fact that one can play with his/her friends, meet new people and create new bonds, work together with others in order to achieve common goals. Just as Yee's theory predicted, all but 2 of them started playing with friends and all of them now have a mixture of online and offline gaming buddies (some of them going into both categories). Players feel connected to and form bonds with other people in the game and most of them have actually also met online friends and befriended them offline as well.

"I've made many friends in game, very nice people from the entire Europe, I know what they do IRL also, I've even met some of them personally, we rented a cabin for a holiday in the mountains, people came from Holland, Sweden and Norway, we were about people" (Valdreth, M, 30)

"I've met people from other countries who really have something to say and have many things in common with me: the pleasure to play different games and experiment, the passion for the fantasy genre and some even go to the same kind of school as me" (Zigurd, M, 23)

When WoW players come together, they spend hours talking about the game, but also about a host of other things, such as politics, religion, hobbies and more. The country barrier isn't really important, as they feel they have a lot in common, in fact, some of them have actually been invited to take a vacation in one of their foreign friends' country and stay over for free at their place. This is another indication of the fact that bonding is facilitated in game by the fact that WoW players already have many things in common when they start playing the game, as it takes a specific socio-cultural profile to become invested in playing an MMORPG.

"We talk about religion, politics, we talk about everything, really, about what it's like in our countries, the differences in our lifestyles and more" (Arcite, M, 28)

"You have your real life friends – colleagues, relatives, childhood buddies and your in-game friends, who may be in a somewhat different category, but are still your friends" (Zigurd, M 23)

The fact that the game is only worth playing, in the eyes of its gamers, if it allows them to share the experience with friends they already had and to meet and befriend new and interesting people in WoW indicates that the MMORPG genre is not only able to foster communities, but it is expressly designed to do so, as it uses the players' social

networks in order to attract new subscribers and promises an opportunity to enlarge those networks with more people with similar interests, then simply provides a captivating framework for the players to bond over and have fun together. This framework – the virtual world itself – represents the practice around which the community is built and the prosperity of said community depends greatly on the game designers' ability to keep many different types of players (Bartle, 1996), with different focuses, engaged and willing to keep playing. My observation, confirmed by the respondents' stories, has shown that there is a specific trajectory WoW players follow from first entering the game to leaving it: they start out as newbies, depending on older players' help for learning the game, then they form a circle of in-game friends, they join their first guild as they become casual players, then, as the demands increase, they invest more and more time in the game, becoming hard-core players (players who do raids more than once a week) and eventually reaching pro status (a pro has completed most of the end-game content in the current or previous expansion). Once a player becomes a pro, he/she will soon become bored and disengaged, eventually leaving to try out new, more exciting MMOs, unless the designers come up with a good expansion to keep them challenged. The problem is that as the game progresses, more and more of the older players start needing even more difficult challenges, while new and casual players also want an opportunity to enjoy the game, which shouldn't be too difficult or demanding. If a perfect balance between the needs of these groups is not reached, one of them will lose interest and players will begin to migrate, taking their friends with them, as it is pointless to play alone. As a critical mass of players leave the game, word gets out that the game is "ruined" and few new MMO players are willing to join, effectively endangering the survival of the community (Poor & Skoric, 2014).

Hierarchies are also an element that doesn't necessarily come naturally among WoW players, but they are usually created by game designers in order to give players something to work for. In WoW, one gets a certain amount of respect and it is a matter of pride if they are very good, but when players meet or chat or among one's group of WoW friends, being very skilled doesn't seem to earn one a privileged position. WoW players are a rather egalitarian group and although a pro may be more listened to when giving technical advice, this doesn't automatically make him a leader in his social circle, as leadership is rather based on a combination of charisma and interpersonal skills. (a good example is the fact that the guild master isn't always the best player in the guild, he is merely the organizer). However, the game designers have introduced several types of rankings for individual players and guilds, in order to introduce competition to the otherwise cooperative game, so players could feel personally rewarded for their dedication and thus, more motivated to persevere. Reaching the top of these rankings is rewarded with special items or titles which make one instantly recognizable as a top player, increasing his/her reputation in game or even outside of it (with every new expansion, the entire community waits eagerly to see who will be the first to finish the new content and those players unlock special achievements and have star status at Blizzard conventions).

When it comes to power, though, the only hierarchies that matter are those within the guilds, who each have a leader (often, the creator) and most of them have a system of lesser leaders, such as class leaders or officers, who are mainly there to help, but may also have the power to apply sanctions to unruly members or even remove them from the guild. Otherwise, the entire regulatory power is concentrated in the hands of the game masters (administrators working for Blizzard) whom the players must turn to if they believe another player has broken the rules and must be sanctioned. Usually though, the community polices itself, by ostracizing repeat offenders and by subjecting them to public shaming.

### **WoW four years later**

As I have stated before, when the previous research was conducted, in 2011, WoW had just reached its peak in popularity, having reached an all-time-high number of subscribers: 12 million people.<sup>4</sup> This had consolidated its position as the world's most successful MMORPG. However, soon after the launch of the third expansion (Cataclysm), it experienced a drop in subscription numbers, which – with the exception of a short-lasting spike following the launch of the latest expansion (Warlords of Draenor) – continued to decline until, at the present time, it arrived down to 7,1 million players. In order to learn the potential causes for this mass exodus of players and also to follow up on their own evolution in practices and attitudes towards WoW and on those of their gaming friends, in 2015, I made an attempt to re-interview the respondents from the 2011 research. Half of them responded to my request, three of the male players and both the female players. This is what I have learnt:

Out of all five players interviewed at this second stage, only one is still playing WoW. She was one of the few casual players and the only role player of the original lot, and this might be the main reason she was, in her opinion, rather unaffected by any changes that were implemented in the game during the 5 expansions she has played through. As she is mainly an explorer, interested in discovering lore and who mainly plays on role-play servers, paying more attention to the storyline of her characters than to combat, acquiring epics and pursuing objective in-game achievements, her playing style and amount of player interaction have mainly stayed the same throughout the evolution of the game. What also helped is that she had always perceived the WoW community as the entire mass of players sharing a common culture, common traits and an availability to offer each other support, rather than narrowing it down to a specific circle of gaming friends so she was less impacted by other players' decision to quit the game.

” I play on a role play server that involves less coordination and more imagination and where everyone helps each other. It's cool that I can join a conversation, say on the LFG channel, which has lately become universal to all areas, without having to have spoken with those people before and I can still feel included in the conversation and I can even talk about non-game-related stuff that we all have in common” (Carmylla, 27)

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<sup>4</sup> According to statistics presented by MMOChampion.com (<http://www.mmo-champion.com/content/4878-WoW-Down-to-7-1-Million-Subscribers>)

Given the great amount of freedom to create her own goals and adventures provided by her specific type of server, Carmylla is determined to keep playing WoW as long as it will be available or at least as long as she can afford the subscription, as the game keeps providing her with the same kind of satisfaction as four years ago.

However, the situation was very different for the remaining four players, ranging from hard-core to pro, as they were much more goal oriented and at the same time, more socially oriented. All of them have given up on the game around 2-3 years ago, after a couple of unsatisfactory expansions, then resumed playing for a short time, hopeful that the latest expansion would solve their complaints, only to be disappointed and quit again a few short weeks later. This follows the pattern of the overall number of WoW subscriptions, which fell to an all time low in 2014, spiked back up following the launch of Warlords of Draenor expansion at the beginning of this year, only to plummet again in before March 2015 (last available data at this time).

It was already somewhat expected, given the results of the 2011 research presented earlier, for pro players to eventually tire of the game and seek new challenges elsewhere, however it was the nature of the new content (or lack thereof) implemented by Blizzard Entertainment during the past three expansions that seem to have driven them away from the game. All four respondents offered the same two main reasons for no longer playing WoW, assuring me that most of their gaming friends felt the same way and have also left the game. All of these reasons lead back to the erosion of the two central elements of a community that is at the same time of play and practice: the game experience itself and the ability to share that experience and bond over it with friends.

### ***The lack of challenging new content and repetitive nature of the final three expansions***

As they had mostly experienced the end-game content of the original game (called Vanilla in WoW jargon) and the previous two expansions, they were looking forward to exciting new content to challenge them. However, the game designers seemed to them to have decided to make the game more accessible to less skilled players, by making it much easier and more repetitive, with less hard combat and more minigames they felt infantilized them. The deprivation they felt for the satisfaction to obtain new hard-earned victories, that would test and further improve their skills and coordination, made many of them retire from playing. This broke up guilds and groups of gaming friends, leading even more members to abandon the game for lack of company, so it was mainly a social issue that led them to stop playing, but one brought about by the architecture of the new expansions.

” [I quit WoW] Because most of my friends that I was playing with had quit and because the game is already old enough and we had already grown used to the company’s whole routine of coming up with new expansions with very little content and it was simply not as much fun. There was nothing new anymore, although they were striving to come up with something new” (Zigurd, 27)

### ***The perceived dissolution of the social aspect of the game***

A major complaint of the respondents concerning the changes in the game infrastructure made by the designers is the fact that they introduced new mechanics and options that led to the erosion of the social side of the game, so important to maintaining its player community. Thus, if in earlier days, one was supposed to find one's own dungeon or raid group, most players turning to the guild to a familiar and trusted circle of gaming friends to increase chances of success, in the later years, the game makers introduced the option to be randomly grouped with a number of unknown players. This, correlated with the diminished difficulty of the raids and dungeons and the routinization of combat rendered guilds and steady circles of gaming friends mostly useless in order to efficiently play the game. Along with it, the players felt robbed of the satisfaction of the hard-earned victory accomplished with friends, the binding glue that brought WoW gamers together. Thus, the original promise of making friends while one played became empty, a dangerous situation for a community not only of practice, but also of play.

”As for the social aspect, everything is sort of gone, because they introduced all sorts of features, such as RaidFinder, that practically discourage interaction and then the notion of guild, of getting to know people no longer exists, it's just „let's get this raid over with quickly, finish this content and then start all over again next week” (Bocănilă, 28)

As it was emphasized in both stages of this research, WoW players see no point in playing alone or in being unable to meet and get to know and play with new people in game. Community is important to them, as is the sense of belonging and most of the fun of the game is obtained in relation to others – not an abstract notion of others, but people they are familiar with and care about, who are a part of their team.

It could, of course, be argued that players are still free to connect, to form guilds, to make friends and play with them on a regular basis in spite of the new features – they could simply not use them. But this would on one hand hurt the practice, as it would be less time efficient and on another hand, on a psychological level, they would lose the pretext to get to know each other. The previous game mechanics were built in such a way that even if players initially had no intention of making friends with, say, the members of a random party they entered to do a dungeon with, the dungeon would usually take so long and require so much coordination that they would naturally start talking, introducing themselves, making jokes and sizing up each other's personality, skill and gaming style. Since raids took even longer, were even more complex and involved more people, it was the rational decision to find a permanent group to play (and eventually, bond) with, rather than having to take the chance to find 24 other skilled random people, with decent gear and of the proper classes, heading the same way at the same time. A permanent group, such as a guild, was much easier to organize, communicated better and were much more coordinated than random strangers would be, no matter their skill. But the moment these opportunities and necessities for communication and long-term cooperation ceased to exist, players couldn't simply walk

to a stranger and ask them to chat for a while, so they could get to know each other better – the tasks were too simple and efficiency called for them to go in, make a quick kill and move on to the next quest, leaving insufficient time and reason for congeniality to take place.

All things considered though, all four respondents would be willing to start playing again under certain circumstances, the main condition being for their gaming friends to also return. The nostalgia of WoW is hard to let go of, which is why the four players kept trying to return for short periods of time.

”I don’t think I could ever say „That’s it! I quit WoW for good!”. It was too cool an experience and I keep making periodic attempts at comebacks, I keep talking to the friends I used to play with about this...Somewhere deep inside, I keep hoping some miracle will happen and we will catch a few more good months together in WoW, like the good old days” (Hulkette, 27)

Even though these players have quit the game, they kept in touch with some of their WoW friends, including some they had only met in-game.

”I have people on Facebook that I used to play WoW with and I keep thinking that only yesterday we were kids, we would raid all night...and now we’re exchanging photos of our children. I’m glad we were able to keep in touch.” (Hulkette, 27)

Also, according to one respondent, a good part of the hard-core and pro players have migrated together to unofficial, private - „pirate” – servers, where some or all the expansions have not been implemented, allowing them to enjoy the game version they loved.

”If you log on to Feenix [private server],the whole gang is there. They all left and now they’re playing the Vanilla version, making 40 man raids, like the good old days.” (Bocănilă, 27)

This phenomenon of mass player migration has been previously documented in the gaming academic literature, as Pearce (2009) researched the migration of the “URU Diaspora” – after their favorite MMORPG, URU, closed down, large groups of players migrated together to other virtual worlds, such as Second Life, where they continued to maintain and assert their URU identity and sense of belonging to that community by building in-game artifacts, tributes and events related to their lost virtual homeland. It seems to be one of the ways players manage to keep communities alive when playing the game that birthed them is no longer an option.

The fact that former WoW players still often stay in touch with some of the people they used to play with and many times still keep up with the news about the game, sometimes even continue to read WoW forums, go on discussing the game with friends and keep entertaining the hope that maybe the next expansion will be what is needed to make everybody start playing again shows that the community ties are strong and hard to sever – many ex-players don’t leave for good, they linger around, reliving their adventures and hoping to find a reason to re-join the fight. The interesting thing is

that many of these former players look to the game designers – not the community - for that reason, as their leaving was not a commentary on the community itself.

The fact that these four particular players studied here have quit the game, on a temporary or permanent basis, has no real implications for the WoW community. However, when the stories they tell are correlated with the dramatic drop in player numbers for the game, there is certainly an alarm bell going off that at least certain categories of players are no longer satisfied with the game and that seems to have a lot to do with the controversial changes the game designers brought to the architecture – and implicitly, the social organization – of the virtual world. Given the fact that the WoW community revolves around the playing/practice of the game, any changes brought to it that could destabilize the relationships between players, cause large segments of gamers to lose interest and in-game social structures to disintegrate could endanger the long-term survival of said game and along with it, of the community it has fostered. However, even if it truly was on a path to decline, the WoW community has already lived and thrived for over a decade and will probably do so for more years to come, which can be considered quite a success for an online entity built around a video game in an age of fast-paced changes, with an apparent trend towards the dissolution of offline communities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002)

Thus, the best way to make those who play together stay together for as long as possible would involve, in the case of the WoW community, a joint effort between game designers and players in order to find the balance that would best provide the two key elements for survival: a satisfying practice and a strong focus on promoting the social nature of the game.

### **Conclusion – Do those who play together really stay together?**

The present paper has shown beyond a doubt that even a seemingly trivial thing as a video game can spark and foster a great community around it, one that is no less real even if it is built around a virtual environment. MMORPGs such as WoW are fundamentally social means of entertainment, their success largely depending on their capacity to provide a space for the players to bond, to learn from each other and experience together, to make friends and gain reputations, to fight together, laugh together and sometimes even cry together, creating memories and identities that last a lifetime. I have shown that quite like any offline community of play and practice, the WoW community has, in its over a decade of existence, developed a network of social bonds, a distinct, colorful culture, a set of core values and a specific sense of identity and belonging for its players, providing them with a sense of accomplishment which is many times not so readily available to them in their everyday lives. So we know that those who play together come together, but do they come to stay?

The simple answer to a difficult question would be that a gaming community such as WoW will only fully stay together and thrive as long as the architecture of the game itself will prove able to maintain the players' interest for the game itself and for each other. This doesn't mean that the bounds holding the player community together are



weak or illusory, it only recognizes the fact that – even in the offline world - a community of practice can only live and prosper while the common object of practice still exists, while one of play will require others to bond and share experiences with.

I have shown that while the game started out mostly as an open territory for the players to colonize rather freely (Gunkel and Gunkel, 2009) and build their communities around, the particularities of any environment – actual or virtual – eventually influence the way its colonists' communities are shaped and in the case of MMORPGs (just like in the case of offline communities of play/practice with less than satisfactory governance), outside intervention from the game designers in the areas that facilitate or promote certain social dynamics can lead to either prosperity or mutiny and exodus, destabilizing the community and eventually leading to its downfall, along with the downfall of the virtual world it was built around. In the case of WoW, not unlike other games of its genre, community building was – up to a point - strongly encouraged by the game design, while the resulting community was partially shaped by the architecture of the game and partially the result of spontaneous evolution. Once the main focus of the game shifted away from the community, it became destabilized and starting losing members, which generated a snowball effect towards an even more rapid disintegration (players started to quit simply because their friends had quit).

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