



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

From community to toxicity
Examining structural violence in World of Warcraft
by analysing the raid as a ritual

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2020 / Vienna 2020

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 066 656

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Masterstudium CREOLE - Cultural Differences and
Transnational Processes

Betreut von / Supervisor:

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Mitbetreut von / Co-Supervisor:

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Preface

With this thesis, I attempted to combine two fascinating, but on the first look very different fields of social anthropological research. On one hand is the quite new and modern digital anthropology, or more accurately, the research of virtual worlds. On the other hand is an area of research which's history goes back to the very beginnings of social science and which, at least on the surface, deals with activities that are almost the opposite of modern - ritual studies. On a closer examination however, those two fields have a lot in common and can greatly profit from each other.

This thesis endeavours to explain social activities and conditions in a virtual world by employing insights about ritual processes and structures. The virtual world in question is *World of Warcraft* (2004), one of the best known, most densely populated and oldest still operating massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) worldwide. When I started my fieldwork, my research focus was on a specific type of social violence that used to be very widespread when I used to play *World of Warcraft* as a teenager. However, virtual worlds are developing and ever-changing, so this type of violence had lost its prominence by the time I got back into the game as a researcher several years later. Instead, I quickly found myself fascinated by the influence of a seemingly small part of the virtual world that managed to dominate the social interactions of players within the game and outside, on the forums and social media channels connected with *World of Warcraft*. This little, but domineering aspect was “raiding”, a highly organised social activity in which large groups of players try to defeat some of the most difficult enemies the virtual world has to offer. Around raiding, which is considered by many users as the centre of the virtual world, numerous rules, social norms and conflicts have evolved, which, as this work will show, are existent throughout the online game and merely become visible in the context of raiding. As fascinated I was by raiding and the social pressure it put on a large percentage of the game's population, I had a hard time finding explanations for this phenomenon in social anthropological literature. This is, until I, completely devoid of any approach to solve my dilemma, started to read a beginner's introduction to social anthropology in the hopes of stumbling over anything that might give me an idea. Instead of a simple idea I found the solution to my problem once I reached the chapter about Victor Turner and ritual studies. Although I was, like every student of social anthropology, familiar with his work, I never made the connection during my time in the field. But now, with each sentence the description of the ritual process reminded me more of the raid in *World of Warcraft* and I knew

I had found the approach I was looking for. Further inquiry into ritual studies revealed additional approaches, mainly those of Richard Schechner and Maurice Bloch, that helped me find answers to the questions I was faced with during my fieldwork. Those questions are:

- 1) What is the role of the raid in *World of Warcraft*'s community?
- 2) How are users experiencing social pressure and violence in relation to raids?
- 3) Why is there social pressure and violence on players?
- 4) How can the raid be understood as a ritual-like event in the context of *World of Warcraft*?

And last, but definitively not least:

- 5) How can concepts of ritual studies explain players' experiences with social pressure in connection with raids?

This work is structured into four major chapters.

The first one is an introduction into *World of Warcraft* and should help the reader understand the virtual world, even if he or she never experienced it personally. It deals with the choices a player has to make before they¹ can start playing, how a normal day in the virtual world could look like, explains what raiding is and examines the importance of space and social interactions for the game.

The second chapter provides the theoretical perspectives that this work is built upon. It starts with a short history of ritual studies and a few definitions and elaborations on the nature of ritual. A large part of this chapter deals with Victor Turner's work on the ritual process and the explanation of central concepts like *communitas*, the liminal and liminoid and social drama. It further examines Turner's cooperation with Schechner and the kinship of ritual studies with performance studies. Last, but not least, it summarises some critiques on Turner's work. The theoretical part about ritual ends with an introduction into Maurice Bloch's work on ritual and violence. The next part introduces the reader to the other important theoretical framework of this thesis - digital anthropology. The chapter offers a discussion of the term digital anthropology, a short history of its development as a field of research and examines its connection to material anthropology. It continues with a detailed introduction into virtual worlds as a field of research. This part assesses the pros and cons of using "real" as the opposite to "virtual", it offers definitions and it explains the characteristics of virtual worlds in contrast

¹ Please note that "they" is also used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun throughout this thesis.

to other digital environments. The chapter ends with a history of virtual worlds and relevant social anthropological research in and about those worlds.

The third chapter deals with the methodology I used for research and for analysing my data. It is the most personal chapter, as I closely examine my role in the field and all the issues that come with non-traditional fieldwork. In this chapter, I also respond to some of the major reservations that academia still has with digital fieldwork, like the question of authenticity.

Finally, in the fourth and longest chapter, my observations from the field are combined with ritual studies to answer the research questions. The last chapter is structured into five parts, one part for each question. The first describes the role of the raid for the player community into greater detail, the second examines how users are experiencing and enacting social pressure and violence in relation to raiding. The third part explains why social pressure and violence exist in the game and which factors encourage them. The fourth part analyses how the raid can be understood as a ritual in the context of *World of Warcraft* and, finally, the fifth part pulls it all together and examines how understanding the raid as a ritual can explain the social pressure and violence that users experience in connection with raiding.

1. Introduction to the *World of Warcraft*

1.1. Vignette - A typical afternoon in *Azeroth*

It is 2 o'clock in the afternoon on a sunny Saturday in early January. I place my freshly made cup of tea left to my laptop and click on the *World of Warcraft* icon on my desktop. Like every day, I choose my level 110 blood elf demon huntress and hit “enter”. It takes ages for the loading bar to fill and neither the game tips popping up nor the well-done illustration of a man fighting a giant, purple demon can distract me from the waiting time. I have seen both too often and already know every detail with my eyes closed. The loading time seems to be longer when the virtual world is busier and on a Saturday afternoon it is high noon in *Azeroth*. Finally, I'm logged in and my avatar manifests in the middle of a bustling city in the skies - “Dalaran”. I waste no time and enter “/g” in the chat bar at the bottom of my screen, opening the chat of my guild *Oktopus* and greet them with a heartfelt “hi”. My guildmates got a notification as soon as I logged in and it is considered rude not to say hello, equal to walking into a room full of acquaintances and not acknowledging anyone. Etti and Yannik, two of my closest contacts, are already online and greet me back, Etti instantaneously falling into a recount of the delicious lunch she just had. While we are still comparing our lunches, Yannik messages me in a private “whisper” chat, asking if I have had the time to check out the article he sent me on how to maximise my character's abilities. A few days ago, he commented on my gaming skills, stating that on my gear level I should do higher damage. The article suggested several changes to how I play my character, how I should move it around a target and what abilities to use in which succession. To be honest, I was rather overwhelmed by it. I tell Yannik so, but he laughs it off and suggests doing some “dungeons” together for training purposes. I have nothing better to do, so I agree. Yannik posts “running some quick dungeons with Lea, 1 tank, 1 heal and 1 dd needed²” to the guild chat and quickly enough all the positions are filled. Etti, in her position as the top healer of the guild, as well as Marvin, the guild's best tank, and Dirk, another avid player, decide to join us and we form a party. Dirk still has a level three “keystone” for “Halls of Valor”, so the group decides to start there. The dungeon is the one that I am most familiar with, but I am afraid that level three is outside of my skill range. Out of us five, I am by far the worst player, but having them behind my back relaxes me a little. I know with those four by my side we won't have any problems. In order to enter the dungeon on “mythic” level, we have to

² I did fieldwork on a German speaking server and with a German speaking guild, so all quotes from the virtual world are in German originally. I translated them for this thesis and provided the original quote in the footnotes, like in this case: “Laufen schnell n paar dungeons mit Lea, 1 tank, 1 heal und 1 dd needed”

travel to its location first. I use the flight time to log onto my guilds' *TeamSpeak* server, seeing there are a few people talking even before I put on my headset and can hear their conversation. Familiar male voices and a single female one greet me and for a moment I enjoy feeling so connected to people even while sitting alone in my dorm room. Then our party arrives at the entrance to the Halls of Valor, a Valhalla inspired zone full of Valkyries and giants and we switch to a private chat room on *TeamSpeak*. The other guild members get silenced and I can only hear Etti, Yannik, Marvin and Dirk. We waste no time and enter the dungeon. Dirk places his keystone on the pedestal and after a short countdown that we use to eat some buff food we are off. The first fight is easy enough, I have done it several times and by now have remembered when to move out of the way of the dragons and how to dodge the lighting spells. Still, I must concentrate on the game and cannot join in on the jokes the other four are telling. After the first “boss”, we move on to the next area. It is a broad, long hall with tables and benches full of giants on both sides. The giants, large and strong as they might be, are only “trash mobs”, designed to make our progress through the hall more difficult, but no real danger on their own. Without needing to talk about it, our entire group stays very close to the wall and moves along to the right, taking out two or three of the giants at a time. When I first visited the Halls of Valor a few weeks ago, I made the grave mistake of running through the middle of the hall, alerting all the trash mobs on both sides of my presence and causing them to attack me. My character was killed within seconds, my team had to deal with the attackers and the “tank” called me a “fucking noob” for “pulling all the mobs³”. I learned from that mistake. This time, we make it through the hall without problems and end up in a lush forest full of dragons, wolves, bears and other woodland creatures. Most of them are hostile mobs again and would attack if we get too close. We mount our steeds at almost the same time, mine being a lumpy, green triceratops that I worked hard to obtain. Without a command the group sets into motion, following a winding path between trees, avoiding the hostile woodland animals. I can never recall the exact path to take and have to rely on more experienced players to lead the way. Over my headphones I can hear someone noisily eating snacks as we get closer to Fenryr, the giant wolf we are here to kill. As we are almost there I mess up and run right into a bear that the others managed to avoid. “Sorry, didn't see that one!⁴”, I apologise as we defeat it quickly and rush on. The fight with Fenryr is business as usual, I disrupt his spells whenever I can, avoid standing near team members who were affected with negative effects, get behind the large wolf while Marvin's paladin character is capturing its attention and attack it with all I got. But I promised Yannik to

³ “fucking noob pullt alle mobs!”

⁴ “Sorry, hab den übersehen!”

practice my new rotation, so I force myself not to fall into my familiar, comfortable routine of pressing only three keys and activating my cool-down abilities every once in a while, but instead my avatar dashes from side to side twice using my “Fel Rush” attack, followed rapidly by casting “Metamorphosis”, causing my character to turn into a large, winged demon that deals twice the damage and then hitting the wolf repeatedly with “Chaos Strike” and Fel Blade until Fel Rush has finished its fifteen second cool-down and becomes available again. The screen shows a flurry of yellow and green numbers, light effects and warning notices from my “deadly boss mods” add-on. In real-life, I am starting to sweat a bit from the excitement and stress. My four team members do not seem to feel the same pressure, Etti has started talking about dinner plans while her character heals the tank and deals damage to Fenryr at the same time. Finally, the large wolf breaks down and we can loot its corpse. Dirk gets the “Hide of Fenryr” chest piece, but since it is well beneath his gear level, he offers it to me. Happily, I accept, it is an improvement to my current chest piece, raising my gear score from 845 to 850 and heightening my character's abilities. I glance at the “damage per second” meter on the left side of my laptop screen to check if the new rotation has enhanced my performance and really, I am on third place behind Yannik's shadow priest and Dirk's druid! This causes a surge of joy to flow through me. Never before have I managed to do more damage than Etti, who might play a healing priest, but can also cause a lot of damage to enemies. My surprised “Yeah! Third place!⁵” is greeted with congratulations from the others and instantly followed by constrictive criticism from Yannik on how to improve further. I listen with half an ear while our group rushes back through the forest to face the next boss, still giddy with excitement. The forgotten tea next to my laptop has gone cold.

1.2. Getting to know a virtual world

World of Warcraft is a type of online game known as MMORPG based on the extensive *Warcraft* franchise that includes a real-time strategy computer game series first published in 1994, several novels, comic books, a trading card game, a movie, magazines and tabletop games (Warcraft, n.d.). Published in 2004, it soon became the flagship for fantasy themed multiplayer online games. Although *World of Warcraft* is nowadays considered to be a slightly dated MMORPG in comparison to the large amount of newer games that were released in the fifteen years since its existence, it is still one of the best known and most popular virtual worlds out here. During its heyday in 2008 player numbers counted as much as ten million active accounts

⁵ “Yeah! Dritter Platz!”

(Glenday, 2009). Over the years this number has reduced. In June 2013, on a very rare occasion, *Blizzard* stated that there were currently seven point seven million subscribers to the virtual world (McWerthor, 2013). This number seems to have been dwindling further since, but despite this, *World of Warcraft* is still one of the most well-known virtual worlds to this day. Exact numbers of paying players are hard to come by because *Blizzard*, the company in charge of *World of Warcraft*, does not release official statistics. Therefore, all the speculations about player numbers are exactly that: speculations, albeit sometimes backed by leaks from *Blizzard's* developers. *World of Warcraft* is not free to play, users must pay for a monthly subscription that ranges from 10,99€ to 12,99€ per month, depending on whether you pay monthly, every three months or every six months.

World of Warcraft is a large virtual world with several continents for the users to discover and it has, as is typical for MMORPGs, no ultimate goal or end. Unlike with single player games, *World of Warcraft* is too complex and gigantic to exhaust all the possibilities, to complete all the quests, to get all the accomplishments. There is no way to “finish” the game. Thanks to various expansions over the years, the virtual world has grown into a large and complex construction, both geographically and story-wise. Players are made citizens of *Azeroth*, as this virtual world is called and explore the stories laid out by the game designers through interacting with the world and other users. Users can create several characters on several servers, but usually there is one that they primarily play with and refer to as “main”. Player characters in virtual worlds are often referred to as “avatar”, like the Sanskrit word that literally means “a god’s embodiment on Earth” (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 23). It is a fitting term since the avatar acts as the player’s representation within the virtual world.

1.2.1. The bones - servers, factions, races and classes

When creating a new character, the user has several important decisions to make. First, they must decide on which server they want to play. There are currently more than 250 possible realms, as servers are also called, available to European players, separated into English, German, Russian, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese speaking domains. The language is not the only thing that differentiates servers from each other, player numbers and the type of server are other important markers. In general, there are four types of realms - player versus player (PvP) and player versus environment (PvE) servers, as well as roleplay PvP and roleplay PvE servers. On roleplay servers, players act out large and complex fantasy narratives with their characters and gameplay, as well as player interactions, are much more story-driven than on regular servers, where it is usually completely fine to call your avatar “Peanutbuttersandwich”

and not talk like a character from a Tolkien novel. Probably the most important distinction however is PvP versus PvE, because it drastically changes the gameplay experience. On PvP servers, users from the opposing factions can attack each other at almost any given time, while on PvE servers, they intentionally must seek out special areas to fight each other. Switching servers later is possible, but only for a fee.

The next important decision when creating a new character is the choice of a faction. In *World of Warcraft*, users are separated into the “Alliance”, which is depicted as an organisation of lawful creatures led by a human king and the “Horde”, their rowdier counterpart under the leadership of an orcish war chief. Once the choice has been made, it is impossible to create another character from the opposing faction on the same server. In the game, the two factions can only communicate via expressions like laughing, waving or making rude gestures, but all textual messages get distorted to gibberish for members of the rival faction. This artificially created hostility is a central aspect of the player interaction and users often take it very seriously, even going so far as to take it outside of the game and have arguments in Facebook groups about whether Horde or Alliance is best. During the time of my fieldwork and research in affiliated Facebook groups⁶, I witnessed many posts where players showed off their Horde or Alliance themed tattoos, home décor or weddings. This suggests that many players tend to strongly identify with their chosen side.

After deciding on a faction, the player finally gets to choose their avatar. Since *World of Warcraft* is fantasy themed, the characters players create to take part in the virtual world are orcs, elves, dwarves, zombies, talking animals, gnomes, trolls, goblins, and humans. Those are called “races”, and each has some special traits and abilities that get balanced with some disadvantages. Alliance and Horde each have seven races to select from⁷ and almost every race starts at a different location on the extensive virtual map. For the most part however, the choice is purely cosmetic, just like the possible decision between male and female and the choice between several hair styles, skin colours and adornments. This explains why the percentage of elf characters is much higher than those of gnome or “tauren⁸” avatars. Gnomes and tauren might have some minor advantages over elves in regards of some abilities but playing a character they find good-looking seems to be more important to most players. *World of Warcraft* uses the “third person perspective” which means that players see their avatars move

⁶ Due to privacy concerns I will not provide links to those posts, as they were posted in private groups.

⁷ Alliance: humans, dwarves, night elves, gnomes, draeneis, worgen, pandaren

Horde: orcs, undead, tauren, trolls, blood elves, goblins, pandaren

⁸ Tauren are a bovine race with cultural traits inspired by the native people of the American Great Plains.

through the virtual world as if they were running right behind them or hovering over them. The game's perspective seems to motivate many players, especially men, to choose an attractive avatar that might not match their own gender. According to Nardi (2010: 159) and Yee (2005), the reasoning behind this can be broken down to "When I have to look at someone's ass for three hours, it's going to be a girl's".

The most important part about an avatar however is neither their race nor their gender, but their class, which determines a character's abilities and roles within the game. During the time of my active fieldwork between November 2016 and Spring of 2017, there were twelve different classes with different abilities and ways of playing, but it all boiled down to three major types - "damage dealers", "tanks" and "healers". Damage dealers are the most common and numerous type and they focus on inflicting damage to opponents, either by using spells, controlling creatures or fighting with melee or ranged weapons. Tanks are types that can take a lot of damage and concentrate on protecting their fellow players from attacks. Healers not only heal others, but also use performance enhancing spells. While most damage dealers can heal themselves a little bit and all healers have abilities to inflict damage, when playing in a group with others, users tend to stick to their avatar's main function. Each class further has several specialisations that ultimately determine the type one is playing. Druids, for instance, have as many as four specialisations and can choose to become tank, healer, ranged or melee damage dealers. Others, like mages, can only become damage dealers, but the three specialisations control which abilities and spells are available to them. Specialisations can be easily switched throughout the game, but an avatar's class cannot be changed in any way whatsoever. Other aspects, like a character's name, gender or race can be altered by purchasing a one-time permit for real money in *Blizzard's* online shop or, when it concerns the avatar's appearance, by simply visiting the barbershop in-game.

The twelve classes available to users fit the fantasy theme of *World of Warcraft* and use much of the same role archetypes that are found in other fantasy themed computer games. There are paladins, hunters, rogues, death knights, priests, warlocks, warriors, mages, shamans, druids, demon hunters and monks. Except for hunter and warrior, not every class can be chosen by every race. Which class is available to which race is determined by the in-game logic and story of each race. The cow-like, bulky tauren, for instance, cannot become rogues, a class that relies heavily on stealth and speed, but they do have the option to become druids. In *World of Warcraft*, druids are depicted as especially connected to nature, they can turn into different animals and even into a tree. Therefore, only races with a strong bond to nature can play this

class. Besides tauren, those include night elves, “worgen⁹” and trolls. Some restrictions only make sense when the story behind *World of Warcraft* is considered, like when it comes to elves and the warlock class, a kind of dark magician that summons demons. There are two elf races in *World of Warcraft* - night elves and blood elves. Night elves represent the “good” elves who are in sync with nature and close to their moon goddess, whereas blood elves are the “evil” ones that got dependent on arcane magic and came in contact with evil forces. Out of the two, only blood elves can become warlocks.

1.2.2. The meat - leveling, quests, dungeons and raids

Depending on which race they chose, the avatar might start on a snowy mountain near “Iron Forge”, the dwarves’ and gnomes’ hometown, or at a cemetery near “Undercity”, the capital city of the undead. Player characters start at level one and users spend a considerable time to level their avatars to the maximum level, which during the time of my fieldwork was capped at 110. They do so by gaining experience points through fulfilling various quests given to them by non-player characters (usually shortened to NPCs), which can include fetching certain objects, killing monsters or travelling from A to B. Quests usually can be completed without help from other players, but cooperation tends to make it faster and easier.

Another option to level up is to do “dungeons” or “raids”, special areas of the virtual world that are home to extraordinary monsters, which can only be defeated through the combined efforts of several players. Dungeons require five players, of which one generally is a tank and one a healer, the rest are damage dealers. Raids are even more complex and difficult than dungeons and accordingly demand more people for a chance to succeed. Raids can take groups as large as 40 players several hours to complete and are generally considered be the most complex, most demanding, but also most rewarding part of *World of Warcraft*. Other than dungeons, raids are only available to characters on the maximum level.

Quests, dungeons and raids not only grant experience points, but also equipment for the avatar. This equipment can make the difference between a “good player” and a “bad player” and users therefore constantly strive to improve it. Once a character has reached the maximum level, the real game begins. Some consider the whole, often very time consuming level up process to be merely training for the “end game content”, which has led Blizzard, the company developing and owning *World of Warcraft*, to sell shortcuts to instantly get a character to level 100 without having to spend weeks on the level up process. The choices of what to do once one’s avatar has

⁹ Worgen basically are werewolves.

reached level 110 are endless. One could for example spend time exploring every corner on the virtual map, maximise one's abilities in various professions such as cooking, fishing or tailoring, collect mounts and pets, compete with other players in arena fights or try to master the most difficult raids in the shortest amount of time. Even on level 110, there still is lot of room and demand for improving one's character. As already mentioned, good equipment is incredibly important. To make it easier to compare equipment, each piece of armour and weaponry is assigned an "item level" and a higher item level generally indicates that the piece of equipment is better. The average level of all pieces of equipment of a character combined is called the "gear score" and is used to determine how well an avatar is equipped and consecutively, how good said character is. Minimum gear score requirements are often used to weed out new or less determined players when forming groups and the gear score effectively becomes a tool for gatekeeping.

Good equipment can easily double the damage a character inflicts on a monster. Players who want to take part in raids or fights with other players constantly strive to improve their gear score. By completing dungeons and raids, players have a chance to get better equipment. The higher the gear score, the more difficult the dungeons must be to get useful items. Yannik, one of the most active guild members, who was online several hours practically every day, took 42 days to get from gear score 874 to 893, while the "guild master" Etti, also a very active player, only managed to improve from 879 to 885 in the same amount of time. This illustrates how time and work intensive this is.

Still, many players consider completing increasingly difficult raids and dungeons to be both the most entertaining and the most important aspect of *World of Warcraft*. When I asked about what role raiding played in their relationship with *World of Warcraft*, one interview participant replied:

A big role. Its the base of everything i do ingame. Thats the reason im in a guild and have People to do all sorts of content with. Itsvthe reason i spend time on gearing my char. Its the reason i research my class and the raid to always preform as good as possible. It gives everything i do in wow a purpose (November 5, 2018, grammatical errors not changed¹⁰).

¹⁰ In this entire thesis, I have refrained from correcting grammatical and typing errors from English language data collected via *Facebook*, forums and chatlogs as those, sometimes intentional, errors can be important for understanding the tone of the message. German language data has been translated into correct English, but I have included the original, unchanged quotes in footnotes.

The majority of users that I encountered shared this sentiment, but some, while recognizing the importance of raiding for the development of their avatars, disliked how they were forced by the game mechanics to participate in raids and dungeons. One way or the other, raids and dungeons are central aspects of the virtual world and have become even more prominent with the introduction of the “mythic plus” system with the release of “Legion”, the current expansion pack during my fieldwork. The mythic plus system introduced constantly rising difficulty levels to dungeons where before only “normal” and “heroic” modes existed. By completing a dungeon in “mythic” mode within the time limit, one of the five group members by chance gets a “keystone” to a random dungeon. By finishing that one within the time limit as well, the group gets better “loot¹¹” and another keystone with a higher level to another random dungeon. Each level makes opponents and conditions in the dungeons harder, but also offers better rewards. There is no end to how high levels can become and so ambitious players constantly try to beat the record. The mythic system is particularly popular due to the lesser numbers of team members and time needed in comparison to raids.

1.2.3. The soul - friends, parties and guilds

World of Warcraft is a MMORPG and therefore by definition a social game. This shows not only in the large numbers of players running around the virtual world at the same time, but also becomes very clear when we look at the activities to do in said world. Although there are some things that can be done alone, like fishing, gathering materials, exploring or completing most quests, almost all of the more rewarding activities require a group to complete. The foes that leave the best loot behind after they are defeated are too strong for a single player to beat and many of the central quest chains end in dungeons or raids, where only groups of five players or more have a chance to succeed. Cooperation with others therefore is the key to success in this virtual world, but success is not the only reason for players to group up. When I asked what they considered to be the most fun in *World of Warcraft*, the overwhelming majority of players answered “playing with friends”. The friendships that people form in-game were also the most common named reason for why they continued to play *World of Warcraft*. When the question “what is your motivation to play *World of Warcraft* after all those years” was asked in a *Facebook* group about the virtual world a player responded:

the friends, colleagues, the guildies, the dungeon buddies and the battlefield companions that I met through this game. The people with whom you meet regularly every night and

¹¹ The material rewards that a defeated opponent leaves behind. Those can include, amongst other things, in-game currency, equipment, crafting materials and quest objects.

because of whom you completely lose your mind if you finally get to meet them in real life. Community is the magic word, at least for me (*Facebook* post, July 17, 2017)

Several others repeated this sentiment in their own words. Etti, the leader of the guild that I joined during my fieldwork, also expressed how much the friendships in-game meant to her when I wanted to know what brought her the most joy when playing.

Well, earlier on it was farming. Because I am a collector. I mean, I'm not big about collecting clothes, but getting around and collecting material, this was really fun for me. And nowadays it is mostly being active on *TeamSpeak* and talking to and dealing with people. I would, well, I don't know if I would really call them friends, but I have a lot of good acquaintances here and I am happy when they ask me for help and I am happy if they just talk to me. I don't know how closely you follow the guild chat, but sometimes they talk so much bullshit! It's hilarious! And so I'm talking in the guild chat and on *TeamSpeak* and we also have a *WhatsApp* group where people that raid with us can write with us and I'm also talking stupid stuff with them there. And this really brightens my day and that's where I would say, yeah, if that didn't exist anymore, I would probably stop playing at once. If they said 'nah, not in the mood any more' and it would all fall apart, then I would freeze my account and be like okay, that's it, it's no fun anymore. (Etti, January 8, 2017, translated from German¹²)

¹²“Also, früher wars das Farmen. Also, ich bin ja Sammlerin. Also, nicht so sehr jetzt die Klamotten, aber unterwegs zu sein und Material zu sammeln, das war total Klasse für mich. Und jetzt ist es hauptsächlich glaube ich das hier im *Teamspeak* sein und mich mit den Leuten zu unterhalten und mich mit denen auseinander zu setzen. Würd jetzt, also gut, ich weiß nicht, ob ich das wirklich als Freunde bezeichnen würde, aber ich hab hier recht viele gute Bekannte, und ich freu mich, wenn die mich um Hilfe fragen, und ich freu mich, wenn die sich einfach mit mir unterhalten. Also, ich weiß nicht, wie viel zu da aus dem Gildenchat so mitbekommst, aber die erzählen manchmal so einen Blödsinn! Es ist so der Hammer! Und das führ ich halt einmal im Gildenchat, einmal im *Teamspeak* und wir haben ja auch eine *WhatsApp*-Gruppe, wo dann die Leute, die Raiden und so, und der Pat immer rein kann und mit uns schreiben, und da mach ich halt auch Blödsinn mit denen. Das lockert mir so den Tag auf und das ist so das, wo ich sage, ja, wenn das nicht wäre, würde ich wahrscheinlich auch sofort wieder aufhören zu spielen. Wenn die jetzt sagen würden ‘oh nö, kein Bock mehr’ und dann würde das auseinander brechen, dann würde ich auch den Account einfrieren und sagen ok, hat sich erledigt, macht keinen Spaß mehr.“

Players are well aware of the fact that they form strong bonds with people who they might never see face to face and are often very reflective about it. In early November 2018 I posted a survey with six questions about players' relationship with raiding and their attitudes towards this game aspect in one of the biggest *Facebook* groups for *World of Warcraft* enthusiasts. One of the ten participants, when asked about personal experiences that they thought would be interesting for me to hear, told me:

- a) I learned some days ago that a lady in the group is pregnant. Even though I've never seen her in real life that generated some warm feelings, felt happy for her, etc.
 - b) A year ago a member of the guild died (in real life). It felt the exact opposite, especially since he was the one who persuaded me to join the team. It's interesting how the digital experience evokes such feelings for people you only (or mostly) meet online.
- (November 5, 2018)

There are several ways to play with others that give you benefits in the game. First, players always can form parties of five or less with all players from their own faction, given that they are not yet in a party. Parties can be formed and dissolved very easily and have some useful functions, like automatically sharing the loot¹³ and experience points between all members. Another useful feature of being in a party is that enemies killed by the individual members add up, which makes completing the common “kill x monsters” quests a lot faster. It is therefore not uncommon for players to spontaneously and often wordlessly form parties when they notice a fellow player doing the same quest. In fact, it is considered to be the polite thing to do, as the users would otherwise have to compete over the limited number of enemies.

Guilds, formal groups with a clear hierarchy and shared resources, are arguably the most important and long-lasting way for players to group up. To start a guild, the future “guild master” must buy a special document from a NPC in-game and have it signed by four guild-free player characters from their own server. This is in stark contrast to regular parties, which are very easy to set up, work across servers and are easy to dissolve. It is impossible for a character to be in more than one guild at the same time. While theoretically a player could have three characters and be in three different guilds, it is more common to stick to one guild and add all of one's characters to it.

¹³ There are actually several settings for sharing loot that can be selected by the party leader, like blocking everyone but the “master looter” from looting or making it first come, first serve. However, the default option splits loot squarely and lets party members roll dices for special items.

Being part of a guild brings several advantages, like getting more experience points, mounting steeds faster or being able to purchase special items, but the most important factor is the social aspect and the loyalty guild members express towards each other. While some guilds only exist for the aforementioned in-game advantages and consist of hundreds of players that barely interact, most guilds are smaller, but have active social interactions, ranging from chatting in the guild channel, over helping each other with quests to raiding together. Guilds tend to be the centre for social interaction and are vital for success in *World of Warcraft*, as they are incredibly important for getting help and support in the game. This becomes abundantly clear when we look at how often complaints in *Facebook* groups about “mean players” or a lack of help get replies like “find a good, helpful guild and stop whining”(*Facebook* post, December 26, 2016).

Still, there are multiple guild types and several ways for finding a guild. Some guilds are formed by real-life friends or family members that casually play *World of Warcraft* together, some are highly disciplined e-sports teams that participate in international tournaments with high prizes whose members get recruited by talent scouts. Most seem to be somewhere in the middle of those two extremes and are guilds with a few dozen members that formed primarily through online contacts. Even though real-life guild meetups do happen sometimes, most players will never see their guildmates in person. Some of their members were scouted in *Facebook* groups centered around the virtual world, some applied to join the guild via the in-game “guild finder” function, some just happened to start talking with guild members while doing quests together and ended up being invited. Others maybe replied to a recruitment message on the “trade channel” that read something like this:

23:56:10 [Torak-Thrall]: Our guild “Bloodpact of the Horde” is looking for active players for the mythic raid content // Mythic+ (RDDs//GS 870) 18+ (7/7HC//2/3hc)Sa+So 18:00/w me (Discord for the WIN!) (December 19, 2016, translated from German¹⁴)

Understanding messages full of abbreviations like this tends to be a prerequisite for being accepted into a guild and effectively often excludes new, inexperienced players, whether this is intentional or not. No matter how, sooner or later almost everyone seems to find their way into a guild. In my small survey shared in two large *World of Warcraft Facebook* groups, 93% of the 193 participants answered that they were currently part of a guild. This survey questioned participants on their experiences with exclusion from groups and their attitudes and strategies

¹⁴ “23:56:10 [Torak-Thrall]: Die Gilde “Bloodpact of the Horde” sucht nach aktiven Spielern für Mythic-Raid-Kontent // Mythic+ (RDDs//GS 870) ab 18+ (7/7HC//2/3hc)Sa+So 18:00/w me (Discord for the WIN!)”

towards judging the skill of others. It was distributed in March 2017 and answers kept trickling in until early April 2017.

Besides forming parties and joining guilds there is another important way to keep in contact with people - the friend list. By entering their “battletags”, players can keep in touch with others even across the various online games owned by *Blizzard*. Adding someone as a friend only works on a mutual basis, but in exchange you can see when they are online, what they are playing and, if they are playing *World of Warcraft*, where their avatar is currently located. It is especially useful since battletags stay the same, even if a single user switches between multiple characters.

1.2.4. Space and Place

Space and places play an important role in *World of Warcraft*. The virtual world emulates an actual world and is structured into continents that are themselves structured into “zones”. It is possible to reach every zone on one continent by foot, but much like in the real world, that could take a while. Therefore, knowledge of the virtual transport system, that mainly consists of portals and (air)ships and the geography of *Azeroth* is crucial and can save a lot of time. Since there are no guides or instructions about travel routes accessible within the game, players either must find out themselves, look for guides on the internet or ask others within the game for help. The last option is to ask players who can create a magical portal for assistance. While friends of guild members might do this for free, strangers usually expect to be tipped.

Image 1: Part of the world map



Image 2: A zone on the continent of “Kalimdor”



Approximately every very two years, *Blizzard* releases an expansion pack that introduces a new maximum level and, often, new zones with new quests and new enemies. That causes all players with the previous maximum level to move to the new zones, effectively deserting the previous area. Since, at the time of my research, there had been six expansions since *World of Warcraft* started in 2004, the virtual world has grown significantly, yet player numbers have remained largely the same. This means that in “old” zones one might not encounter another player for days, while the “new” zones and capital cities are bustling with people. The old zones, where mostly low-level quests, monsters and players are located, tend to be visually less appealing than the newer zones with the high- to end-level content. Many of the old zones are rather boring grass lands, deserts or forests that do not particularly convey a lot of magic or fantasy, but the newer zones are colourful landscapes with shining rocks or fascinating mountain areas. Some spots on the virtual map hold a special relevance because several important structures like vendors, auction houses or transport systems can be found there. Most often, those spots are cities and naturally this is where players come to relax between quests and raids. During my fieldwork, three cities were especially important - “Orgrimmar”, the Horde's capital city, “Stormwind”, the Alliance's capital city, and “Dalaran”, the capital city in the current end-level zone. Often, cities belong to one of the two factions and any player from the opposing side trying to enter is attacked by the high-level guard NPCs, but there are also some shared cities, like Dalaran. Shared cities are a safe haven, since players cannot attack each other while within the city's parameters, even if they play on a PvP realm.

Space plays an important aspect when it comes to communication as well. Within their faction, there are several ways for avatars to interact. In addition to the already mentioned expressions, players can either talk via various chat channels, can whisper a single person privately or can choose to interact with all players nearby by letting word bubbles appear above their heads. Chat channels and whispers are the most commonly used of those options. Depending on which groups a character is part of and on the zone the avatar is currently in, a player may use a group channel, a dungeon or raid channel, a guild channel, a general zone channel and a trading zone channel. Some zones, like capital cities, have very active chat channels, while other zones are completely devoid of communication. If a player's character is not located within a zone, he or she cannot “hear” the conversations going on within it. Capital cities are an exception, as they share some chat channels, which let a player located in Orgrimmar read what another user is saying on the trading chat channel in Dalaran. In addition to the textual chat, players use external programs like *TeamSpeak* or *Discord* for voice chat. They are programs unaffiliated

with *World of Warcraft* but are very popular with online gamers of a wide range of games and virtual worlds. However, this is mostly reserved to friends or guild members.

This introduction should have given the reader a first impression of what *World of Warcraft* is, how it works and how players get to interact. Many important aspects like raids and group formation have intentionally been dealt with rather superficially and will be examined in greater detail in a later chapter. The research questions of this work already disclose that concepts of ritual studies will be used to analyse raiding, so now it is time to introduce the reader to the theoretical background of this thesis.

2. Ritual Studies

Defining ‘ritual’ is like defining ‘jazz’ (Grimes, 2013: 186)

There is no easy, simple definition of ritual. Ronald Grimes, renowned ritual researcher and author of several books and even more articles about ritual, even argues that attempting to define ritual not only is quite difficult, but, for the biggest part of the population, is in fact quite meaningless. Different people and social groups understand ritual in different ways and outside the academic context, this is usually not a problem (Grimes 2013: 185-189).

However, this thesis is an attempt to show that I am an academic, so I will have to try to find a definition of ritual that I can work with. This is no easy task, evidently shown by the myriad of definitions of ritual formulated over the course of more than one hundred years of social scientists studying ritual.

2.1. A short history of ritual studies

The founders and early proponents of social science, among them Émile Durkheim in 1912, were interested in ritual as a part of religious life and, motivated by colonial endeavours and shaped by their European, mostly Christian worldview, tried to formulate universal truths about rituals (Brosius, Michaels, & Schrode, 2013: 11). Durkheim formed the basis for the understanding of ritual as having a social function and was of great importance for later scholars of ritual, even if many of his ideas and methods were later contested. Especially his evolutionary approach, as well as his scientific construction of totemism later came under critique (Gottowik, 2001). Durkheim, fascinated by religion despite identifying as an agnostic himself, viewed society as a moral community whose members’ solidarity was created and enhanced by rituals. Durkheim saw religion as the manifestation of society. Praying to a transcendental being is therefore, according to Durkheim, praying to society or to the transcendental group identity.

Rituals, as part of religion, were thus developed to standardise actions as a group and to create and strengthen societal connectedness (Krieger & Belliger, 2013: 15). Arnold van Gennep, the French linguist and ethnographer, was a contemporary of Durkheim. After his book *The Rites of Passage* (published in 1909) was finally posthumously translated from French to English in 1960, his work on the three-part structure of rituals became incredibly influential in ritual studies. According to van Gennep, life cycle rituals like initiation, marriage or funeral rites follow a three-part structure of separation, transition and incorporation. Depending on the type of ritual, one of the three parts might be more important than the others, but every “rite of passage” contains all three elements. A key concept in his work was that of liminality, derived from “limen”, the Latin word for threshold. The liminal phase is the phase of transition, where the subject of the ritual is outside of the boundaries of its usual social role, suspended in an “anything goes” state, before re-entering social order in the form of a new role or social status (Barnard & Spencer, 2002: 737-38). Van Gennep’s work was prominently taken up and spread by Victor Turner after he read the English translation of his book in the 1960s (Bräunlein, 2012: 51).

Around the time of the publication of the translation of van Gennep’s work, the understanding of the term “ritual” in the social sciences underwent a transformation. Up to this time, rituals were seen as the execution of social “texts” and rituals were understood as having a rational function and meaning stemming from outside the ritual that a neutral observer could basically extract from the process. Although the strong connection between ritual and religion was slightly loosened over time, ritual still was not seen as its own field of research (Krieger & Belliger, 2013: 7). According to Brosius, Michaels and Schrode (2013: 11-12), several events aided the transformation of the term “ritual” starting in the mid-sixties. First, behavioural biologists Julius Huxley and Konrad Lorenz developed an ethological ritual concept that also inspired social scientists. Second, several influential publications about ritual theory were published in quick succession (e.g. Mary Douglas 1966, Edmund Leach 1966, Victor Turner 1967 and 1969 and Stanley Tambiah 1968). And third, a certain ritual exoticism arose in western society that connected subversive, experience based, creative practises with the classic term. Anthropologists, without doubt stimulated by the *zeitgeist*, started to research rituals as symbolic, expressive, performative, communicative events rich with experience. The transformation of the term also led to a more positive image, which in turn made researchers analyse events and activities in industrial, western societies as rituals. In the course of the so-called “performative turn”, social scientists started to draw parallels between ritual and drama and got interested in ritualised social interactions and daily activities.

This trend continued and today ritual is researched not only in the context of religion, but also in the contexts of theatre, media, politics, the arts, education and many more. “Ritual studies” is the term for the broad, interdisciplinary community of ritual researchers that was established in at a conference of the *American Academy of Religion* in 1977 and subsequently prominently taken up and spread by Ronald Grimes in various publications, like *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* from 1982, *Research in Ritual Studies* from 1985 or *The Craft of Ritual Studies* from 2013. It is a very diverse field with an interdisciplinary approach and therefore a multitude of perspectives and theoretical backgrounds. Central to most of them is the attempt to describe rites in various areas of social life, tending to look at ritual as a performance and speaking of the “ritualization” of activities (Krieger & Belliger 2013: 7-9). However, it is important to make a distinction between ritualised every-day activities and actual ritual-like activities. Both are characterised by formalised, repetitive, performative actions, but the former is lacking certain cultural markers that indicate that this action is of higher importance than other areas of social life (Brosius et al., 2013: 13). If there is one consensus in contemporary ritual studies, it is that rituals constitute and express personal, social and cultural identity. Belonging to a group or a society is expressed via ritual and rituals are important for identity construction. The theoretical discussion goes on between seeing ritual mainly as “conservative”, structure conserving, or as “transformative”, structure changing (Krieger & Belliger, 2013: 31).

2.2. Definitions

Given that rituals are no longer only seen as located in the realm of religion and spirituality but are also found in such different areas like sport events and political procedures, many of the earlier researchers’ definitions of ritual have become too restrictive for the new understanding of the term. Contemporary authors are reluctant to give definitive definitions exactly because of the plurality of rituals and ritual-like events and tend to use polythetic characterisations to allow researchers to decide for themselves whether an event can be understood as a ritual.

Brosius, Michaels and Schrode (2013: 13-15) name eight characteristics:

- 1) Rituals are acts with which humans intend to impact their (social, physical, spiritual, etc.) surroundings.
- 2) Rituals are deliberate, conscious, planned performances, even if subconscious aspects exist.

- 3) Rituals are framed - they happen within a certain timeframe and/or at a special place, they often have a clearly defined beginning and end, and frequently have a clear objective. This sets them apart from everyday life as special acts.
- 4) Rituals are characterised by a formal, stylised, and sometimes stereotypical performance and deviations from it get noticed. Sometimes the rules to the performance are codified.
- 5) Rituals have meaning and spark a reaction in the people or social groups involved in them. This meaning might be, for instance, connected to spirituality or descent, it might be transcendental or have relevance on a societal level.
- 6) Rituals are effective and, at least from the emic perspective, make something happen. The effects are not trivial but have important consequences.
- 7) Rituals are consciously constructed, more or less rule-bound, relatively stable and symbolic patterns for activity that are supported by and shared within a social group.
- 8) Rituals are not rigid and unchanging, but dynamic and process oriented.

Grimes, reluctantly, offers a more concise definition of ritual: “Ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment” (Grimes, 2013: 195).

In this definition, “embodied” means that ritual is a human activity done with the use of human bodies, so purely mental actions cannot be rituals. “Condensed” relates to how ritualization may evolve out of ordinary human behaviour and everyday life, but rituals themselves are packed tight with all that ordinary behaviour and meaning - they are condensed. “Prescribed” refers to how there are right and wrong ways to do ritual, sometimes the “what” is prescribed, sometimes it is the “how”. Lastly, “enactment” comes from how rituals are set apart from ordinary life and the action of “doing ritual” deserves a special term. On stage, the process of playing theatre is called “to act” and similarly, because there goes special attention to the process of doing ritual, Grimes calls it “to enact” - related to the theatrical term, but different, because the participants do not pretend like in the theatre, but are playing out their own roles (Grimes, 2013: 195-196).

2.3. Ritual efficacy

The effort to assess the efficacy of rituals has been going on ever since James George Frazer and Edward B. Tyler first started to study rituals and religion. While for the participants of rituals, they do work and are effective, unless mistakes are being made in the execution, an external observer might not agree on the success. Töbelmann (2013) summarises several attempts at this difficult topic, showing that it usually came down to a distinction between real or functionally effective and expressive-symbolic activities, or operative efficacy versus doctrinal efficacy. This view is rooted in the obsolete mindset of the 19th century that saw non-

Europeans as primitive and unfit for intellectual accomplishments. The explanations also failed to account for the persistence of objectively non-effective rituals like rain dances. Progress was made when rituals started to be analysed as performative acts, but they still pose the inherent problem that emic explanations follow different worldviews than the etic considerations of researchers. It is therefore still problematic to determine the effectiveness of a ritual.

2.4. Central figures

The remainder of this chapter will be used to further elaborate the ritual concepts of the two scholars whose ideas play a major role in the analysis of my findings - Victor W. Turner and Maurice Bloch.

2.4.1. Victor Turner

Victor Witter Turner, a Scottish anthropologist born in 1920, remains to this date one of the most influential writers about ritual. A student of Max Gluckman and part of the Manchester School, he studied the Ndembu in Zambia and developed a particular interest in their rituals. After his emigration to the USA in the early 60s he published a series of publications on rituals and symbols that were ground-breaking (*The Forest of Symbols* 1967a, *The Drums of Affliction* 1968, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 1969) (Bräunlein, 2012: 11). Having emerged out of the Manchester School, Turner's work was informed by the tension between structure and anti-structure for the entirety of his career, as shown in his use of "social drama" - the process of periodic social conflicts and their re-integration into society. Turner viewed the dialectic between social order and social disorder and the unplanned, spontaneous events which would eventually evolve into planned, purposeful events as the basis for the development of rituals (St John, 2008: 43-44). For the rest of his life, ritual in all its manifestations would stay the centre of Turner's academic endeavours. In the late 60s Turner and his wife Edith, devout Catholics themselves, began to study pilgrimage with emphasis on liminality and *communitas* (Bräunlein, 2012).

2.4.1.1. Liminality

His theories were strongly influenced by van Gennep who he read when *Rites of Passage* was first translated into English in the early 60s. The book left a major impression in Turner, who already was interested in ritual and saw forms of liminality not only in his fieldwork, but also all around him in the popular culture of the sixties and the students on campus (Turner, 1969: 112). Turner took van Gennep's concept about the three phases of rites of passage - separation, transition, incorporation - and argued that they were not only found in rites of passage, but in

every ritual in “tribal” societies (Turner, 1974: 58). The phase of transition, also called the liminal phase, was of particular interest to Turner, perhaps due to his universal attention to the relationship between structure and anti-structure. During the liminal phase, individuals are outside of their usual role, they are “[...] temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others. But it also liberates them from structural obligations.” (Turner, 1974: 59). Despite being outside of structured society, Turner argued that the possibility of inverting and freely playing with social rules enables the initiands to learn about the structure and rules of society. Unlike Durkheim, who saw ritual as the representation of social structure, Turner found that ritual partially transcends social structure, but in the end still secures the social status quo and strengthens social inclusion. However, Turner already recognised the ritual as a processual event, as something that is continuously changing.

2.4.1.2. Communitas

Another core concept of Turner is “communitas”. The term refers to an instant, spontaneous feeling of relatedness and community, unobstructed by class, role, status, gender, sex and age that forms between individuals who are currently in the same liminal stage outside of structured social life (Turner, 1974: 76-82). Here, too, we see Turner’s attention to structure and anti-structure: “Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom” (Turner, 1969: 113). Despite that, he does not equate communitas with anti-structure. According to Turner, communitas is more of a contrast than an active opposition to social structure (Turner, 1974: 82). The longer the liminal phase, the more intense becomes the feeling of communitas, but because its central structureless-ness, it cannot be sustained indefinitely. A core aspect of Turner’s communitas is the spontaneity and immediacy with which it develops, so attempts to hold on to and formalise the feeling without fail lead to the demise of true communitas. Nevertheless, endeavours to hold on to communitas are not rare. Turner, looking at the “historical fate” of communitas, therefore names three types:

Spontaneous communitas is “a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities, a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction. It has something 'magical' about it” (Turner, 1974: 79). It is the communitas that is not planned, that happens without intention and that has everyone feel connected and open themselves to the other members of the group.

Ideological communitas is “a set of theoretical concepts which attempt to describe the interactions of spontaneous communitas” (Turner, 1974: 79). It is, in a way, a utopian model of

society constructed to make all human interactions resemble the original, spontaneous *communitas*.

Normative *communitas* is a “social system, a subculture or group which attempts to foster and maintain relationships of spontaneous *communitas* on a more or less permanent basis” (Turner, 1969: 80). With that attempt however, it denatures true *communitas*, because spontaneous *communitas* cannot be legislated. The spirit of the sixties is strongly visible in Turner’s portrayal of normative *communitas* as he goes on to describe groups of like-minded people that formed out of spontaneous *communitas* and sought to hold on to that feeling by installing rules and norms. He states that communities of normative *communitas* often arise during a period of religious revival and that they differ from other groups by not basing their foundation on productive relations or kindred. Instead, “[s]omething of ‘freedom’, ‘liberation’, or ‘love’ (to use terms common in theological or political-philosophical Western vocabularies) adheres to normative *communitas*, even although quite often the strictest regimes devolve from what are apparently the most spontaneous experiences of *communitas*” (Turner, 1974: 80). According to Turner, individuals connected in *communitas* often remain close to each other even after they are re-integrated into society.

2.4.1.3. Liminal - liminoid

In his earlier writing Turner maintained that liminality, as well as true *communitas*, could only exist for members of “traditional” societies. However, as his use of spiritual Hippy sects as an example for normative *communitas* shows, he was well aware that *communitas* could also occur in industrial societies. Therefore, he later introduced the term “liminoid” to account for ritual-like activities in a non-religious setting. An important distinction between liminal and liminoid is the obligation of the liminal and the “optation” of the liminoid phenomenon. Even if initiands within a liminal phase are outside of social structure and can break social norms, they do not have a choice in that matter. They have to subvert norms, they have to make fun of their elders, they have to break social laws because it is part of the ritual process (Turner, 1974: 73-74). According to Turner, the reason for this lies in the obligations that come most often from religion. Liminality tends to happen in a religious context and you cannot opt out of a religious ritual, you must enact it as prescribed. Turner sees the liminoid, removed from the obligations of a higher power, as the secularised, industrialised derivation from the more fulsome forms of ritual (St John, 2008: 46). However, Turner states that in complex modern societies both liminal and liminoid types exist in a sort of cultural pluralism. Liminal rituals for instance exist in religious organizations, in sects, in the initiation rites of fraternities. Liminoid activities are

largely found in the realm of leisure - in sports, art and games (Turner, 1974: 86). The possibility of choice does not diminish the importance liminoid activities have for their participants. As Grimes wrote in 1990: “the liminoid is sacred to members of a secular society” (cited in St John, 2008: 10).

2.4.1.4. Social Drama

Another central concept of Turner’s work is that of “social drama”, a term that already appeared in his dissertation about the Ndembu titled *Schism and continuity in an African society* (1957). For Turner, social drama is a four-part sequence consisting of breach, crisis, redress, and schism or reintegration. Underlying, sometimes invisible tensions in a group can be understood as breach and are brought forward by the crisis, an event or action that makes the breach clearly visible. The redress part is understood as the most important. It is a process where all kind of actions are undertaken to heal the crisis, to bring things back to stability. Those can involve, among others, ritual, war, gift exchange, trial or negotiation. In Turner’s work, this third phase is also the location of the liminal/liminoid phase and of potential communitas. The final phase is either schism or reintegration, meaning that either the social group buries the conflict and finds together again or that the group splits up. Turner saw his concept as a valuable way to analyse all kinds of social conflict. This idea was often criticised since Turner took Western ideas of dramatization and applied them to non-western, particularly African, societies. However, scholars like Richard Schechner (2012) come to Turner’s defence and argue that story telling is universal in all human cultures, so Turner’s story driven concept still works worldwide.

2.4.1.5. Turner, theatre and performance

In the late 70s, Turner began to take his life-long interest in theatre to the academic realm. In Richard Schechner, a theatre researcher, teacher, producer and co-founder of “performance studies” as an academic category, he found the perfect partner for this enterprise. Again, Turner’s favourite three-part schema can be applied to performances, linking it even closer to the ritual process. Schechner understands “performance” as an inclusive category that contains theatre, play, sports, ritualised daily activities in industrial societies, as well as ritual in traditional societies (Bräunlein, 2012: 100-101). Since then, the term has been evolved continually. John Lewis (2013: 7), for instance, argues that to understand “performance” one has to look at the distinction between daily life and special events of all sorts. People can single out any event, moment of experience or activity and frame it as something special, thus making an event out of daily life. So, there is no hard boundary between special event and daily life, it

is more like a continuum.

The term “ritual” is given a new direction of meaning, focusing on “performance” and “experience” as cultural and mental dimension, at the same time, “play” starts to be taken serious in the social sciences. “Anthropology of performance” and “anthropology of experience” become the central areas of research in Turner’s final years. In 1982, only a year before his death in 1983, his book *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play* was published. Turner’s earlier concept of social drama fits right into his new research interest. Seeing the social drama as a deep sociocultural conflict that stretches through an entire society (Turner, 1982: 110), he starts analysing theatre in industrial societies as a liminoid process, as he understands theatre as having developed out of ritual. In fact, according to Schechner (2003: 8) all events and activities that can be describes as liminal or liminoid share certain basic qualities: “1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4) rules. Often special places - non-ordinary places - are set aside or constructed to perform these activities in.”

A central difference lies in the separation between audience and actors that happens in theatre but is completely unheard of in ritual. Here, modern theatre’s attempts to break down those walls were of particular interest to Turner and Schechner. However, Turner was also aware of the value of theatre being entertainment and not burdened by cosmology, ideology and theology (Turner, 1982: 120).

2.4.1.6. Critique

A career as long and fruitful as Turner’s naturally could not stay without critics. Graham St John (2008) for instance criticises Turner’s tendency to plaster van Gennep’s tripartite schema of the rite of passage over every other ritual. He argues that many events are more closely related to play than to ritual, such a games and sports, and therefore should not be analysed with this schema. However, as he also (2008: 49-50) notes, “[...] it is also true that some games become ‘ritualized¹⁵’ over time: that is, in some cases they become matters of ultimate concern”. Not only Turner’s use of van Gennep’s rites of passage has been the centre of critique, but also his ambitions to unite all kinds of human conflict under his concept of social drama. Clifford Geertz (1980) for instance argues that Turner’s tendency towards universalisms fails to acknowledge the diversity of cultural contents.

Worthy of critique is also Turner's use of the dichotomy between modern and traditional as a

¹⁵ Please note that while this thesis is written in British English, I have refrained from changing the American spelling of words like “ritualized” into the British “ritualised” in direct quotations throughout the text.

central part of his work on ritual. In fact, he deemed the distinction between traditional and modern societies so profound that he was unwilling to recognise rituals in any other aspect of American culture aside from the most traditional religious events like weddings or religious initiation ceremonies. Of course, the overwhelming evidence for the existence of rituals and ritualised events in Western societies even outside of “sacred” areas was hard to ignore, but he would rather use different terms - ritual-like and liminoid - instead of questioning the dichotomy between modern and traditional societies itself. In Turner's defence, he was a child of his time and anthropology would still need a few years to start criticising the problematic distinction between modern - “us” - and traditional - “them”- societies and realising this dichotomy as the artificially created, Eurocentric fiction it is (e.g. Sahlins, 1999). Despite not agreeing with Turner's use of traditional and modern, the concept of liminoid as a voluntarily entered field of ritual and liminal as defined by obligation works incredibly well for *World of Warcraft*. Therefore, I will not disavow this dichotomy completely in this thesis. Anyways, it might be comforting to see that both liminal and liminoid spaces can be found in a computer game like *World of Warcraft* that Turner himself would have placed firmly in the realm of “modernity”.

Bräunlein (2012: 159-161) summarises another common critique of Turner's work. It has been argued that his work showed not only his male bias, but also his adult bias. Carline Walker Bynum or Ronald Grimes for instance point out that Turner failed to acknowledge the female experience of liminality. Others, like Bernhard Baudler, argued that he did not recognise the young participants' pain and terror that often comes (especially) with initiation rites and that serve as way for the elders to secure their supreme position in society. In a way, Turner, as well as van Gennep, were inherently optimistic ritual scholars. Ritual is depicted as the space of utopic possibilities, as an alternative to society, religion as the source of inherent morality. Communitas is seen as the ideal communal state without admitting the violent group dynamics that can arise from such a state. Other important concepts of ritual that analyse the connection of ritual with aggression, sacrifice or death are ignored by Turner.

2.4.2. Maurice Bloch

One scholar who does not fail to acknowledge the darker side of ritual is Maurice Bloch. The British anthropologist with French roots born in 1939 did much of his research in Madagascar where he focused, among other topics, on the origins of ritual. Influenced by Turner and van Gennep, but dissatisfied with their optimistic approach towards ritual, he formulated his own model of rites of passage in which violence plays a major role. In his book *From Blessing to Violence*, published in 1988, he seeks to explain the historical, cultural and symbolic

background of the circumcision ritual of the Merina people which is full of symbolic and actual violence.

In Madagascan Merina society, the “deme” is a bilateral descent group with the shared ancestral tomb as a central identification point for the whole group. Social descent/ancestors/civilised society are associated with “hasina” - dry, cold, dead, transcendent, wise and unity - while biological descent/living beings/untamed nature are associated with “mahery”- wet, hot, alive, dirty, fertility, power and separation. Being/becoming hasina is the ultimate goal both for the individual and society as a whole, but without mahery, society cannot reproduce and exist. Mahery is therefore a necessary, yet extremely dangerous evil. In order to control it, things and people associated with mahery are humiliated in the ritual and shown to be inferior to the hasina parts of Merina society. The circumcision ritual is a blessing both for the young boy in the centre and for the whole deme group around him, but it is also a way for “society” to show its dominance over “nature” and in extension, a way for men to show dominance over women, who are seen as closer to nature and for elders to show dominance over younger members of society. Elders are seen as closer to the ancestors in the communal tomb who symbolise the ultimate depiction of hasina, therefore the younger members of society are more mahery and inferior to the elders.

This dominance of hasina is shown with symbolic, ritualistic violence towards all beings and things associated with mahery - by threatening objects and people with spears, stealing mahery fruits, ridiculing women and, ultimately, cutting off the prepuce of the young boy in the centre of the whole event. Still, the oppressed people enthusiastically take part in the ritual, because they see themselves as part of the deme that is being blessed and strengthened by the ritual. So even if, for example, their role as women is devaluated during the ritual, the ritual raises them in their role as deme members together with all the other deme members (Bloch, 1988: 176). With the ritual, powerful people further legitimise their power, but the ritual itself does not give them the power to put themselves into this position. They already had this privileged position (Bloch, 1988: 191).

Bloch recognises rites of passage as cultural mechanisms that cement hierarchies in societies. Violence, especially physical violence, plays a key role in them. In Bloch’s ritual model, the classic three-part-structure of ritual stays the same, but unlike Turner, Bloch denies the special importance of the liminal phase. According to that model, rites of passage have two central messages: first, creativity and productivity do not exist due to human activity, but are dependent on a transcendental power that is transmitted through worldly authorities and second, those circumstances legitimise and demand the (often forceful) domination of inferior members of

society by superior ones. Rites of passage act as disguise for the power dynamics of society, they mystify and legitimise them (Bräunlein, 2012: 161).

After this introduction to ritual studies, it is time to introduce the other large theoretical background to this thesis - digital anthropology and virtual world studies.

3. Digital Anthropology

3.1. Digital anthropology - field or method?

Digital anthropology deals with questions of relevance and meaning of digital media technologies in peoples' daily lives, as well as in various socio-cultural contexts. The field developed out of other social anthropological fields like media anthropology, visual anthropology, the anthropology of science and technology and the study of material culture. Given the broad range of digital phenomena, it naturally is a very interdisciplinary field in constant exchange with media studies, design, art and technology research.

Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, authors of one of the standard works for digital anthropology, define digital as “[...] everything that has been developed by, or can be reduced to, the binary - that is bits consisting of 0s and 1s” (Horst & Miller, 2012: 5), thus opting for a very broad definition of the term and, consequently, of the subject of digital anthropology. Digital anthropology deals with everything digital, which allows this rather young field to cover a massive variety of research, spanning from studying the reception of a prominent court case in various online news groups (Hine, 2000) to how people use digital images for remembering (Drazin, 2012). Some digital anthropologists study Tanzanian college students’ use of Facebook while being physically present in the computer room (Uimonen, 2013), others use classic participant observation to write an ethnography about a whole society, just doing that online in a virtual world instead of on a remote island (Boellstorff, 2008).

Some researchers like Boellstorff (Boellstorff, 2012: 39-40) criticise this broad approach, arguing for seeing digital anthropology as a method for researching social interaction via digital technology rather than as a field. The argument behind this is that nowadays digital or internet-mediated communication and content can be found in almost every field of anthropology and that the term therefore cannot be used analogous to terms like medical anthropology or legal anthropology. He further proposes to distinguish the research of virtual worlds from general digital anthropology by calling this subfield “virtual anthropology” (Boellstorff, 2008: 65). I tend to agree with Boellstorff on this matter since for instance the study of mobile phone use at

the work place (Broadbent, 2012) and the detailed exploration of the social life of a virtual world are only marginally related. However, there does not seem to exist a consensus about the use of the term. At the time, digital anthropology is still used both as the name for an entire subfield of anthropology and as label for a method of ethnographic data collection.

Whether you want to see digital anthropology as a method or as a field, an important basis is the notion that digitalisation does not imply the demise of cultural and social authenticity. Horst and Miller (2012: 4) put it this way: “Not only are we just as human within the digital world, the digital also provides many new opportunities for anthropology to help us understand what it means to be human”. In an earlier publication with Don Slater, Miller (Miller & Slater, 2002: 187), makes a similar point: virtual relationships are real. Concerns about how they do not compare to “real” face to face relationships could also be heard at the invention of the telephone and, as we know, the telephone merely added another way of communicating with real humans, just like new forms of digital media and technologies do.

3.2. Development of digital anthropology

Social anthropology has been interested in complex social phenomena and processes for decades, so of course technological developments and changes also have been part of the focus of social science ever since their emergence. The continuous worldwide digitalisation and the social, political, economic and cultural transformations opened new research topics for social anthropology: computers and computer networks, internet, mobile phones, social media and virtual worlds. While digitalisation is often used interchangeable with digitisation, meaning the conversion of analogue documents into digital form, it also refers to the transformation of social life because of digital communication and media infrastructure (Bloomberg, 2018). Digitalisation is a process that we are in right now. Early social anthropological research of digital media was mostly motivated by the advent of the internet. The late 90s and very early 2000s saw the publication of the first works about online networks, online communication and their sociological developments (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Classic social anthropological concepts like Turner's *communitas*, liminality or social drama were introduced to this new field to form a counterargument to modernistic and western-centric concepts of digital sociality widely accepted in mainstream discourse. Even in this new field, the central social anthropological methods stay remarkably similar - various forms of participant observation are still the most important technique for researching the digital. However, because of the variety of the field and the everchanging nature of the digital realm, constantly adapting classic methods and techniques to fit the field is a central feature of digital anthropology. “Digital

ethnography” has become a term that describes both the adaption of classic ethnographic techniques like participant observation and interviews to digital contexts, as well as the invention of new techniques fitting the specific needs of those often rapidly changing fields. Depending on the research design and the field, those could for instance include analysing virtual artefacts, screenshots or videos, as well as historical and archival research (Budka, 2019: 169-171; Boellstorff et al., 2012).

In the almost two decades on social anthropological engagement with new digital information technologies, there has been a change in terms. In the early days, scholars talked about “cyber anthropology”, nowadays the term “digital anthropology” has become more common. The research foci have stayed almost the same: evaluating the socio-cultural implications of new, digital technologies. Cyber anthropology and digital anthropology are heavily influenced by the socio-technological developments and narratives of their time. In short, both are trying to answer the question what it means to be human in a digital world (Horst & Miller, 2012).

“Cybernetics”, a term developed in the 1940s by Norbert Wiener from which later derived the prefix “cyber” (Budka & Kremser, 2004), was not only a major inspiration for the development of a broad range of terms and ideas in sci-fi literature, it also inspired the development of the anthropology of cyberculture. Central to this is the research of communication between humans and machines. In the 1990s, Arturo Escobar was one of the first anthropologists to map out the field of cyberculture and to suggest researching it in his influential article *Welcome to Cyberia*. In the article Escobar (1994: 216) identifies three anthropological interests of research that were starting to develop in this time:

- 2) Cyberspace, being a place of social interaction shaped and made possible by new technologies, as suggested by anthropologist David Thomas in 1991. This includes the social production of virtual worlds.
- 2) Cyborg anthropology, which was first introduced with two panels at the annual American Anthropology Association meeting in 1992. This area of research deals with the boundaries between humans and machines.
- 3) Cyberculture, urging anthropologists to study and describe the emerging practices and social and cultural transformations connected with it technoscientific developments.

The field of cyber anthropology is a bit broader than the one of digital anthropology, given the development of the former out of cybernetics and the research of not only communication technologies, but also biological-technological basics and the transformation of systems and

organisational forms. Especially in the US, cyber anthropology is therefore closely connected with technological and scientific research. The European, especially the Austrian history of the field, also suggests a connection to philosophical, as well as ritual anthropology and religious studies, as the research of Manfred Kremser to religious phenomena in the cyberspace shows. Digital anthropology, on the other hand, is more influenced by concepts of material culture. This approach focuses on the digital and especially on the digital in the context of social relationships and cultural difference (Budka, 2019: 179-180).

3.3. Technology and material anthropology

Social anthropology does not see technological and social phenomena as separate from each other, but in contrast tries to find middle ground between a technological determinism which understands technology as the all mighty force behind social change and technological somnambulism, a position that ignores any connections between technology, society and culture and simply sees technologies as neutral tools (Budka, 2019; Pfaffenberger, 1988).

As with ritual, defining technology is far from easy. Boellstorff (2008: 55) explains that both technology and technique derive from a Greek root that can be read as “*techne*”. *Techne* describes an art or craft which allows humans to interact with and change their surrounding world. It is an artificial thing, art or practice that is not naturally occurring but is man-made and invented by humans. In the Greek mythology surrounding the term *techne*, it is seen neither as inherently evil nor good, its morality depending on the intentions of the user. However, *techne* always implies creativity and creation and the ability to use *techne* is seen as the single most important characteristic of humankind, setting us apart from animals. Technology, deriving from the Greek *techne*, is also deeply connected with notions of creativity and invention, as well as with influencing the world around us. Technological inventions never happen in a vacuum, they are shaped and influenced by their cultural and historical influences. Boellstorff (2008: 32) quotes computer scientist Alan Kay who states that “technology is anything that wasn’t around when you were born”.

According to Pfaffenberger (1988), social anthropology should neither follow the overly simplified views of technological determinism, nor the equally simplified attitudes of technological somnambulism, because both understate the social relations of technology. Instead, Pfaffenberger suggests anthropologists should view technology as “humanised nature” (1988: 244), which defines it firmly as a social phenomenon. The socio-technological system is a combination of multiple connected elements - social structures, coordination and organisation of work, social relations, communication between actors and production and use

of artefacts.

Another approach towards technology comes from material culture studies, a prominent proponent of which is Daniel Miller. His approach is heavily influenced by the notion that the first step in consumption is the transformation of an object from an anonymous ware to a thing with a personal relation and meaning to the consumer. Horst and Miller (2012: 3-4) name six principles that should form the basis for doing digital anthropology:

- 1) The digital, which is defined as everything that can be ultimately reduced to binary code, intensifies the dialectical nature of culture.
- 2) Digitalisation does not mean that human culture is any more mediated or less authentic than before.
- 3) Digital anthropologists must commit to a holistic view of their research interest and must take in all the connected socio-cultural phenomena.
- 4) Digital anthropologists must give voice and visibility also to those on the digital periphery and negate assumptions that digitalisation is necessarily homogenising. Cultural relativism is important in this aspect.
- 5) Digital culture is ambiguous, increasing both openness and closure of related matters like politics or privacy.
- 6) Finally, digital anthropology must recognize the materiality of digitally created worlds.

Horst and Miller (2012: 25-27) see the internet as part of material culture rather than as a technology. According to them digital phenomena and their materiality can be analysed in three layers:

- 1) digital infrastructure, technologies and objects that allow the use of digital services.
- 2) digital contents that are created, reproduced, shared and transmitted through digital technologies.
- 3) digital contexts like space and place, but also the various parameters of human - digital interaction, which are relevant for the production, use and application of digital technologies and influence them.

3.4. Anthropology of virtual worlds

Whether digital anthropology is seen as a field or as a method, the study of virtual worlds is both very connected with digital anthropology, but also differentiates from, for instance, researching social groups in social media. This is due to the unique “placeness” of virtual worlds that sets them apart from other online spaces and practices. Because of some characteristics of virtual worlds that other digital spaces lack, ethnographic research in virtual worlds allows for the use of very classic methods like prolonged participant observation with a researcher that is bodily present in the field site. The research of virtual worlds is a part of digital anthropology that is concerned with the study of communities in and around virtual worlds and it warrants further explanation.

3.4.1. *Introduction to virtual worlds*¹⁶

In order to define virtual world, one first has to think about the term “virtual”. The Cambridge Dictionary gives “almost a particular thing or quality” as definition (Virtual, n.d.). In the case of virtual worlds this means that the virtual world is “almost a world”. This could easily be misunderstood as virtual meaning not real, but, as every user of virtual worlds could confirm, virtual worlds are very much real, they are just not the same as the non-virtual world.

3.4.1.1. *Virtual, real and actual*

Boellstorff uses a very simple argument to dismiss the use of “real” as the opposite of virtual: “Assuming that virtual worlds are not real undermines our scholarly work on them: why bother studying virtual worlds if they are not real?” (Boellstorff, 2015: 2). While users often use “real life” or “real world” when they talk about things outside of their virtual world, only very few would agree that the virtual world is not real in any sense, since they spend real hours, often real money and form real relationships with others while interacting with the virtual environment.

Boellstorff therefore identifies “actual” as the opposite to virtual and argues that “[...]‘virtual’ connotes approaching the actual without arriving there” (Boellstorff, 2008: 19). A virtual world is therefore trying to emulate places, societies, objects and creatures as precisely as possible, but it does not cross the line to becoming physical reality. In a later publication, Boellstorff admits to using virtual, digital and online as rough equivalents and does not mention the term actual as the opposite at all. He continues to insist that placing real on one side of the spectrum

¹⁶ The following chapters about virtual worlds have been published in part in the GRAFO Working Papers in 2016 and have been revised for this thesis. For the original version, see Kerschbaumer (2016).

and virtual on the other is misrepresenting virtual worlds, dismissing them as valid places of human interaction and laments that the term real is hardly ever defined in discussions about virtual worlds. However, he does not offer a satisfactory alternative to using the phrase “real world” (Boellstorff, 2015).

Nardi (2015) on the other hand uses the term real as the opposite to virtual and argues that actual carries the same semantic fault as real. Other terms such as offline or physical are also inadequate as they suggest that online and non-physical are only inherent to virtual worlds and do not exist in other spaces as well. She therefore sticks with the word that most people use when they talk about their life outside of the virtual world:

‘Real world’ is a folk term in gamer (and other) discourse, and its consistent use in an established lexicon recommends it in the absence of a better academic term. When I questioned gamers about why they spoke of ‘the real world,’ they replied, ‘Well, we have to call it something.’ (Nardi, 2015: 20)

Nardi further suggests that language is still catching up with the new reality of virtual worlds and that, even though currently no appropriate term to describe the opposite of virtual exists, this might change in the future.

Personally, I agree with both Boellstorff’s and Nardi’s points. While I strongly disagree with treating virtual worlds as unreal, Nardi is right by pointing out that actual” carries the exact same connotations as real”. Her decision to use real world as the opposite to virtual world stems from the lack of better alternatives and the widespread use of this term within the community of virtual worlds’ inhabitants. While I would appreciate the introduction of a more suitable word to describe the non-virtual, as long as our language has not developed one, I can agree to using the problematic, but common real.

3.4.1.2. Definitions and characteristics of virtual worlds

As varied and heated the debates about the terms virtual and real are, definitions from different scholars for virtual world are strikingly similar.

Klastrup and Tosca (2004: 413) call virtual worlds “cyberworlds” and define them as such:

We understand cyberworlds to be computer mediated, networked and spatially navigable multi-user environments. They contain the possibility to interact in real time with other users and to actively interact with and influence the world itself. They can be game worlds or entertainments world or social worlds, but most cyberworlds provide all three opportunities (gaming, being entertained, socialising) in some form.

For something to be a virtual world Boellstorff (2008) argues that it must be a place inhabited by real people realised by online technologies. Castronova (2005b: 22) states that a virtual world is a „[...] ‘synthetic world’, by which I mean any computer-generated physical space, represented graphically in three dimensions, that can be experienced by many people at once.” All definitions agree that to be able to call a computer mediated environment a virtual world, three basic conditions must be given: First, it has to be realised by computer and information technologies; second, it has to be inhabited and experienced by many people at the same time; and third, it has to be recognised as a place, although it does not matter if this place is experienced graphically or textually.

The virtual world as a place is a concept that sets virtual worlds apart from, for instance, online forums or social media platforms. Being able to experience a virtual world in a spatial sense can be broken down into spatial orientation, connectedness and the possibility of exploration. Most virtual worlds nowadays are graphic virtual worlds and are three dimensional, so often virtual worlds are misunderstood as only existing in a graphic 3D sense. According to Pearce¹⁷ (2009), virtual worlds can easily be textual or only existing in 2D, as long as all participants share a similar idea of how the place looks and how to navigate in it.

Connectedness describes virtual world’s inherent trait of consisting of connected areas, zones or rooms. Virtual worlds, whether graphic or textual ones, are mappable. This “mappability” in turn encourages users to explore the world and move around. Pretty much every area in a virtual world is made to be explored; restrictions or forbidden zones are connected to the inherent rules and stories of the game. Often areas get unlocked once the user reaches a certain level or unlocks certain achievements. Other zones might be permanently restricted for certain player characters, due to wrong group membership or character class. In addition, virtual worlds are coherent in themselves. This means that in addition to all the aforementioned traits, the different aspects of the virtual world, like aesthetics, rules, background story, objects and so forth, match. For example, if a virtual world is called *Age of Camelot* and revolves around the legend of King Arthur, users might find it weird if they can use spaceships to move around. If, on the other hand, they use horses, it matches their expectations and the virtual world appears coherent.

Another central characteristic of virtual worlds, the necessity of being inhabited by many people at the same time, can be further structured into malleability, social relations and the participation of every user. In contrast to other media like books or movies, the user is an actual part of the

¹⁷ Celia Pearce named her avatar Artemesia as her co-author for the publications that came out of the research done with this avatar to honour the social persona and the independent agency that a researcher’s avatar can attain during fieldwork (2009). I will respect her decision by naming Artemesia as a co-author in references, but to not confuse readers, I will only name Pearce in the continuous text.

virtual world and interacts with it and, within the borders the developers set, can change it. Every user has a role within the virtual world and even if someone decides not to form relationships with other people online and tries to stay away from social contact, his or her actions are still going to be noticed by others acting in the same environment. This sociality is another central attribute of virtual worlds. They are inhabited by thousands of people sitting in front of their computers, generating the necessary social layer.

All those people interacting with and influencing their environment would of course become meaningless if the virtual world would disappear when the user logs out. Permanence is therefore an essential part of virtual worlds. It ensures that almost everything that users created or influenced persists even if everyone logs out and the virtual world is left with no inhabitants. Only through this feature it becomes possible and worthwhile to pursue goals, solve long term tasks and build social networks. However, how far this permanence goes depends on the type of virtual world. Many virtual worlds have resources that refresh themselves after a certain amount of time and some have a kind of weekly set-back to enable their users to complete certain tasks again and again. Virtual worlds like *Second Life* that let their inhabitants build things generally have a stronger permanence than virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* that focus on enhancing a player character.

Another essential feature a virtual world must possess for users to develop their social networks is the recognisability of the users. People must, in one way or another, have a consistent identity that makes them recognisable to others. Virtual worlds ensure this by making certain aspects of the embodiment of the user in the virtual world, also known as the avatar, unchangeable and unique. Commonly this is the name users select during the creation of an avatar and often the chosen player class cannot be changed as well. Even if a person can change their appearance in the game, others can identify them by their name (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009).

The issue of being able to change one's personification in virtual worlds has fuelled one of the main arguments against the usefulness of online research - the question of authenticity. This matter is going to be addressed in detail in the method chapter of this thesis.

3.4.1. History of virtual worlds

Books play a surprisingly big role in the evolution of virtual worlds. Fantasy classics like J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* were often used as inspiration for virtual worlds and other works often lent concepts and terms to the creators of virtual worlds, such as William Gibson, who first used the term "cyberspace" in his 1982 short story *Burning Chrome* and later popularised

the it through his *Neuromancer* trilogy (Budka, 2019). Tabletop and pen-and-paper games, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, were heavily inspired by fantasy literature. Those games, in which players create game characters and develop and level them under the instructions of a “game master” over the course of many hours, are often said to be the direct predecessors of virtual worlds (Taylor, 2006: 21). Those pen-and-paper games influenced Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw while developing the first public virtual world in 1979. It was called *MUD1* (Multi User Dungeon One) and was a textual virtual world that fell into the fantasy genre. Users got a description of the world around them and could move throughout it, fight monsters, solve puzzles, talk to other players and visit pubs by typing commands like “look” or “go”. Another early important virtual world was *LambdaMOO*, which was released in 1999. The revolutionary aspect with *LambdaMOO* was that the entire text-based world was created and modified by users. By taking into account other player’s creations and exactly describing one’s project it was possible to create and integrate gardens, houses and other objects into the virtual world (Taylor, 2006: 21; Boellstorff et al., 2012: 23-24).

In 1986, *Habitat*, the first graphic virtual world, was released. The most interesting development was the creation of “avatars”, the personification of the player in the virtual world. This term was borrowed from Sanskrit and originally means the embodiment of a god on earth. In the context of virtual worlds, the avatar is the embodiment of a user’s character. In text-based virtual worlds, a graphic depiction of the player was neither possible nor necessary, but with a visual virtual world, it finally became possible to actually see oneself and other users within the virtual world (Taylor, 2006: 24; Boellstorff et al., 2012: 23).

Most of the virtual worlds developed from the late 90s until now use a game concept where the player creates and levels an avatar by battling monsters or other players and completes various tasks. Roleplaying is also often incorporated. Many of those virtual worlds are situated within the fantasy genre, but science fiction or other genres were also popular. Unlike the early virtual worlds that remained a niche entertainment, this new generation of virtual worlds soon became part of mainstream gaming, quite possibly due to computers and internet access becoming a standard in many households. The importance of the roleplaying aspect and the high number of users can also be seen in the umbrella term of those kind of virtual worlds: Massively Multi Online Role-Playing Games, or MMORPG. The most popular of those games was *World of Warcraft*, with close to eleven million paying users during its heyday in 2009 (Glenday, 2009). Even though the number has shrunk since, it remains one of the most popular and well-known MMORPGs.

In the early 2000s, another type of virtual world emerged. Those resembled the aforementioned

LambdaMOO and gave the users bigger freedom. Often there was no predetermined goal for the user to reach, no levels to climb, no story to play and little design of the world from the developer's side. The users developed and designed their own objects and buildings and shaped the world according to their imagination and needs. Social relationships and self-fulfilment were the core of those virtual worlds. The 2003 launched virtual world *Second Life* is with several million users the most popular of this branch of virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 24).

At the moment, MMORPGs continue to be the most popular virtual worlds, but with the growing number of users and available worlds, developers dare to get more creative. Some step away from the beaten track, such as the developers of *Ever, Jane* (2013). This virtual world evolves around Jane Austen's books and the romanticisation of regency era¹⁸ England. Players do not combat, but rather use smiles, conversation and rumours to compete with each other. Another upcoming MMORPG, *Chronicles of Elyria* (in development), introduces aging and dying, so players' avatars will eventually cease to exist.

With technological possibilities advancing further every year, it is hard to say what kind of virtual worlds are going to exist in the near future, but it is clear that they are not going to go away, given that online gaming is more popular than it has ever been. Those exciting developments promise to provide thrilling research opportunities for social scientists for years to come.

3.4.2. Social anthropology and virtual worlds

According to Richard Bartle (2004: 491-493), one of the developers of the first virtual world in 1979 and author of a standard text for students of virtual world creation, the involvement of social sciences with virtual worlds can be dated back to 1992, when the first publication about research in virtual worlds was published. The author of *Virtual Reality*, Michael Rosenberg, did participant observation in *WolfMOO* by spending every evening for several weeks in the virtual world and getting to know the world, its rules and inhabitants. In the mid-90s, some more works concerned with virtual worlds were published. Bartle names John Masterson's 1996 MA thesis about sociolinguistic aspects of virtual worlds as ground-breaking since it was treating the written chats of users as if they were spoken words. Another important work on the linguistics of online games, according to Bartle, was written by Lynn Cherny in 1995. She managed to find out how players conveyed nonverbal statements in text-based communication in five different ways by doing extended participant observation in *ElseMOO*.

¹⁸ The time period from 1811 to 1820.

Christine Hine can also be considered to be one of the most influential social scientists to work with digital fields. Her book *Virtual Ethnography*, published in 2000, perfectly points out the dominant discourse about the internet of the late 1990s. By describing the reactions to a court case that caused great furore online, she shows how happenings in the physical world and on the internet become blurred and she argues for seeing the internet as culture as well as a cultural artefact. Hine also dealt with the methodological problems that online ethnographers face. Her ideas about authenticity of online interlocutors (Hine, 2000: 10; 24; 48) have been used widely (Carter, 2005; Dalsgaard, 2016; Garcia et al., 2009). Her contemporary work (Hine, 2015) continues in this line, as she offers a comprehensive collection and discussion of how to adapt ethnographic methods to internet research.

One of the most important anthropologists to work with virtual worlds in the last years has been Tom Boellstorff. His ethnography *Coming of Age in Second Life*, published in 2008, has quickly become a classic of virtual anthropology. The book is both a traditional ethnography, as it aims to cover as much as possible about the culture of *Second Life*, and a plea for using traditional anthropological methods such as long-term participant observation in a digital setting. Other than many of his colleagues, Boellstorff decided not to meet his interlocutors offline and conducted all of his research within the virtual world, citing his wish to study the virtual worlds “in their own terms” (2008: 61) as the reason for this approach. Boellstorff argues that the residents of *Second Life* would usually not know the people behind the avatars they met online in an offline setting and had to take their claims online at face value, so he, as researcher, decided to do the same, especially since he believes that “actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality” (2008: 63). Despite this, his approach is not ignorant of the myriad ways in which the real world influences the virtual world, but deliberately decides to study those interchanges as they manifest for the inhabitants of the virtual world - online.

Pearce published *Communities of Play* in 2009, in which she writes about the development of virtual communities and their relation to their virtual environment. Special attention is paid to “game refugees” (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009: 6), players who switched to another virtual world once their original one was closed down.

T.L. Taylor is another anthropologist working with virtual worlds. In 2006 she published *Play Between Worlds*, that is mainly a detailed ethnography about the MMORPG *Everquest*, but also discusses different types of players, gender and social networks within virtual worlds. Taylor sees the constant crossing of the boundary between online and offline as the key feature of the internet and therefore did her fieldwork not only online, but also offline.

Bonnie Nardi's work with the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* is of special interest to me, as my own research took place in the same virtual world. In 2010 she published her ethnography called *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*. The book follows Nardi's personal experiences as a player in several guilds in *World of Warcraft*, but also deals with various issues central to the virtual world, from group dynamics over gender to addiction, always asking how the virtual world influences players' behaviour. A small part of the book also concentrates on the cultural aspects of gaming by comparing American and Chinese players. In other publications she deals for instance with users with disabilities or with how customs of a virtual world are learned (Lim & Nardi, 2011; Nardi, Ly, & Harris, 2007; Nardi & Harris, 2006).

Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor joined forces and, drawing from their experiences with fieldwork in virtual worlds, published the first practical guide and collection of methods in 2012. With *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, the authors managed to write an accessible handbook that covers almost every area of research in virtual worlds. They provide, among other topics, tips for successful interviews online, instructions on how to gather good screenshots and chat logs and suggestions regarding ethical questions that might arise while in the field. The authors also use examples from their own research projects to show how they personally solved certain issues that are written about in more general terms in the handbook. For instance, in the chapter on timing and duration of participant observation, it is stated that Nardi had to adhere to the in-game timeline of *World of Warcraft* when she wanted to observe certain special festivities and that Pearce could not do research during summer, as the online university that she was observing was shut down for summer holidays.

Due to the immense popularity of *World of Warcraft*, the virtual world has received a fair share of attention from social scientists over the years. Among them, Nardi's (2010) already mentioned *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* holds a special place as it is a comprehensive ethnographic monography that managed to give a vivid impression of *World of Warcraft* at this point in time and detailed the daily life and social relationships of the guilds that Nardi worked with. Despite being a bit dated by the time that I am writing this (9 years are a lifetime in terms of virtual worlds), I personally still consider it to be the best monography written about the virtual world to this day. Like many older monographies that aimed to describe a culture in all its aspects, including religion, family relations and economy, Nardi wrote in detail about a wide variety of cultural issues in *World of Warcraft* without falling into the trap of treating those topics superficially. Those topics include gender, addiction and cultural differences between

Chinese and North American gamers, as well as analysis of the interpersonal relationships and conflicts of her interlocutors.

Sociologist William Sims Bainbridge's *The Warcraft Civilization* (2010) goes into a different direction with his monography on the virtual world - his book aims to be a grand overview of *World of Warcraft's* lore, fandom and franchise. Bainbridge's research therefore could be described as not done "in" the game, but "about" the game, unlike Nardi's, which lets the reader feel her personal involvement with the virtual world in every sentence.

Virtual worlds have captured the interest of not only social anthropologists and sociologists and therefore many of the most influential researchers of *World of Warcraft* originate from communication studies or psychology, like Dmitri Williams, Nick Yee or Nicolas Ducheneaut, who published several well received studies about player behaviour and player motivation, gender roles and group formation in *World of Warcraft* and other online games (Williams et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2008; Yee, 2006; Yee, et al., 2011). In their work, besides quantitative methods like surveys, they also employed qualitative ethnographic research methods like participant observation, open interview questions and, generally, experiencing the word they are trying to research on their own. In turn, their findings have been often used by digital and virtual anthropologists (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009; Snodgrass, 2014).

There are also publications within digital anthropology not primarily concerned with virtual worlds that still are too important not to mention. One of them is Daniel Miller's and Don Slater's *The Internet*, in which the authors explore Trinidadian's use of the internet for exploring and expressing their cultural identity as "trini". Miller and Slater combine ethnography in Trinidad with fieldwork online to gather data, an approach that has since become popular. Miller is also the co-editor of *Digital Anthropology* together with Heather Horst. After the book was published in 2012 it quickly reached the status of a standard introduction to digital anthropology and shows the wide range of anthropological involvement with digital media.

4. Fieldwork and Methodology

As the title suggests, this chapter will deal with the methodology of my research, data collection and analysis. I will describe the practicalities of online fieldwork, how I gained access and forged relationships with interlocutors, what my daily fieldwork looked like and which additional sources I used to understand the field. This chapter will also deal with some ethical and methodological problems of online fieldwork and will include a discussion of the authenticity of interlocutor statements in virtual worlds. Following this, I will elaborate on my data analysis.

4.1. Data Collection

The research for this thesis spans over a period of almost two years. I first entered the field, aka created a research character for *World of Warcraft* in November 2016. The active online fieldwork went on until April 2017, when I felt that I could not gain any new insights from playing the game. While I was trying to make sense of the collected data from my fieldwork, the other type of fieldwork - following the online conversations of players on *Facebook* - continued until the end of 2018. As already noted earlier, participant observation was my main method of data collection for this research. I tried to get the same experiences as my interlocutors and see this world through their eyes. Although I was lucky to have some previous experience with *World of Warcraft*, this was some time ago and the game had changed a lot since I last played. Not only did I have to relearn the game mechanics and adjust to the changes, but I also had to relearn the language and terms commonly used by the players. The use of abbreviations and nicknames for places, roles and abilities is very common and widespread in *World of Warcraft* and sometimes looks like a code. Learning this language was crucial to understanding what was going on.

My main source of data was playing with my guild members and with many random strangers. Because my first language is German and my first experiences with *World of Warcraft* several years ago were with the German version of the game, I felt most comfortable choosing a German speaking server, meaning that my interlocutors in the field predominantly spoke German as well. I logged all the written conversations in the various chat channels and kept an extensive field diary. In addition to the informal chats via the guild chat channel we also talked via *TeamSpeak*, a popular voice chat program unaffiliated with *World of Warcraft* and used by players of a wide range of online games. I also conducted extensive formal interviews with three guild members and three players that were not part of the guild. Depending on the

preferences of my interview partner, I interviewed them via *TeamSpeak*, via the in-game private chat function of *World of Warcraft*, via *Facebook Messenger* or, in one case, in person. Except for three interlocutors, all the people involved in this research were strangers at first, but I got to know several of them quite well over the course of my fieldwork. Despite that, I did not meet up with any of them. The three people that I knew before I started this research were personal friends who were deeply involved with *World of Warcraft*. Interviewing them helped me to get a better understanding of the virtual world, especially at the beginning and at the end, when I wanted to see of the experiences made in my guild were shared by people outside of the guild. However, it must be noted that they were not involved with the guild that I did my main research with. Two additional interview partners were found via *Facebook* groups about *World of Warcraft*.

Because the virtual world was rarely discussed on a meta level in-game and those conversations were held mostly on *Facebook*, it was crucial for my research to follow the players from virtual world to social media to get the whole picture. I joined the two largest European *Facebook* groups about *World of Warcraft*, one of them for German speaking users with over 11,000 members, the other, English-speaking one, is international and has over 39,000 members. Those groups are used as an outlet for frustration with the game or with other players, as well as a platform for asking questions that would go unanswered in the game. Many conversations on *Facebook* reflected my own confusion about certain aspects of the social interactions in the game that were not addressed in the virtual world. The groups also functioned as a marketplace for finding people to play with and as a news source for everything related to *World of Warcraft* and *Blizzard*, the company developing and owning the game. At the beginning of fieldwork, I focused on doing research directly within the game and to get a “feeling” for the virtual world. During the entire time of research, I kept up with the discussions on *Facebook* and saved conversations that I found interesting, amusing or striking for future analysis. In the early weeks of fieldwork my approach was not yet very systematic and I mostly let my “feeling” guide me in this endeavour. Still, I took part in the discussions and started a few myself as well, always letting the other members know of my research interest. After I ended the active fieldwork in the game itself, I had managed to define the main foci of this research and went back to looking at *Facebook* posts with a narrower lens. I was especially looking for posts and comments that dealt with conflict, power dynamics, raids, ritual, exclusion, expressions of frustration and attempts to make changes in the player community. The English-speaking *Facebook* group organised its posts with the help of “tags”, a fact that proved most helpful. Tags are keywords that can be attached to posts to categorise them and make it easier to sort

through the large number of posts generated each day. For example, if a player was looking for a new guild, she would not have to read through all the newest posts but simply could select the tag “guild recruitment” and see all the appropriate posts at one go. There were several categories, ranging from “news” over “art” to “help”. Almost all of the posts tagged with “vents” turned out to be goldmines for deep discussion among the players. In those posts people complained about certain aspects of the virtual world, like not finding a group to play with, an argument they had earlier that day or trends within the player community that they disagreed with. This type of posts often generated a large number of replies ranging from twenty to two hundred comments. Another type of post that I found very useful were polarizing statements that meant to induce heated discussions like “Classic is overrated. Change my mind” (*Facebook* post, October 10, 2018). During the animated arguments that always followed such posts players often revealed much about their relationship with *World of Warcraft* that tended to stay hidden in *Azeroth*’s daily life.

Due to the very large number of members in those two *Facebook* groups (over 11,000 in one case, 39,000 in the other) and the fact that one post often generated comments and replies from over 40 individuals, I did not directly ask for permission to use their comments in this research. For one, the organizational demands of getting several thousand people to sign consent forms and acquire permission from every single person in the over 50 *Facebook* posts with numerous commenters that I ultimately saved for analysis simply were too much for a single person. Yet, if I had felt that it was unethical to do so, I would have refrained from using any of the *Facebook* posts in my analysis. My second point and probably the most important one: those two *Facebook* groups, despite being closed groups, were not private spaces. Anyone, not only the moderators, could permit new members and with group numbers that high, the participants of those two groups could not expect the discretion of a private conversation. In their handbook for doing ethnography in virtual worlds, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor (2012: 133-135) deal with the often complicated demands of consent for ethical fieldwork in online spaces and come to the conclusion that it is the researcher’s duty to note which spaces and activities our interlocutors define as “private” and “public” and take this into consideration. In this case, I concluded that the members of those two *Facebook* groups did not view their conversations as private, but rather treated the groups as a public space, similar to participating in a podium discussion or writing a reader’s letter to a newspaper. Despite this, I took measures to anonymise all data gained from *Facebook*. First, I will not reveal the names of the two groups and will not provide links to the specific posts. And second, I removed all names, both *Facebook* handles and *World of Warcraft* usernames and changed them in cases where names are

necessary to understand the comment. I believe those actions adequately protect the privacy of the involved people.

Aside from participant observation (or observing participation, on which I will elaborate later in this chapter), analysing *Facebook* posts and guided interviews, I also sent out two surveys, of which the first one aimed to get an overview of how players felt about exclusion in regards of group building, their experiences with exclusion, their views on certain terms and how they themselves would judge their playing style. This one was distributed to my guild members and on the two *Facebook* groups in the middle of my fieldwork with 193 people participating. The second survey was much shorter, with six questions instead of the 35 of the first one and dealt exclusively with the role of the raid in *World of Warcraft*. It was also shorter in the sense that it only generated ten replies. Again, I shared it via the *Facebook* groups.

Finding and using appropriate technology was crucial for the success my research. I had to buy a headset to use *TeamSpeak* and I had to find out how I could take notes of the written conversations in *World of Warcraft*. Luckily, I found *Elephant*, an add-on that allowed me to transfer the so called “chatlogs” into word processing programs. This, in turn, made me able to concentrate on the conversations in the chat channels without constantly trying to take notes on the side. Before logging out for the day I could just copy all the chatlogs into my fieldwork diary. Another challenge was finding out how to archive the relevant *Facebook* posts in a way that made it possible to import them into *Atlas.ti*, the program I used to analyse my data with, without distorting the comment trees. Usually, the posts and the attached comments were too long to simply take screenshots and copy-pasting the text destroyed the structure of the comment trees. In the end, I realised that *Evernote*, a program that I had used since the beginning of my research for general note-keeping and for my extensive to-do lists, had a function that let me save websites. *Atlas.ti*, in turn, could import *Evernote* notes and with that, also the *Facebook* threads that I had saved with *Evernote*. The converting from one program to the other distorted the *Facebook* threads slightly, but still kept the general structure intact, so I could finally analyse them.

4.1.1. Disclosing my role as researcher

Research in virtual worlds in many aspects is very similar to anthropological fieldwork in more traditional social contexts, but it also introduces problems unique to this field. A central one would be the issue of disclosing one’s role as a researcher. Since the researcher’s bodily representation in the virtual world does indeed look like every other person’s and in the flow of the game it might be impracticable to announce to every random player one meets that one is

doing research, the issue of informed consent is a thorny one. Tackling this issue strongly depends on the virtual world and its functions. In some, it might be possible to have a self-description window somehow attached to the avatar that every other player can access. Other virtual worlds might allow to create a profile page with links to external websites. In those cases, introducing oneself as a researcher is relatively easy. Boellstorff (2008), in his research in *Second Life*, took those opportunities and made his research interest known in his avatar's self-description. He also used the game's option to buy land and build a virtual house, which he turned into a publicly accessible headquarters for his research. Most fantasy themed virtual worlds, *World of Warcraft* being one of them, do not offer that option, sometimes arguing that this would disturb the illusion of being an inhabitant of a magical fantasy world, so researchers must make their research interest known in a different way. Often, they are joining player groups like guilds, where most social interactions take place. When applying to those groups, they can inform the guild leaders and in succession the guild members, of their intentions (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006). But not every player group in virtual worlds is as closely guarded as the guild, most are temporary, randomly assembled or so large that single people do not stand out. Some places in the virtual world, such as central cities, might even resemble busy, public areas offline, such as train stations. Asking every person for consent before including the observations made in this public space is both futile and impossible. The authors of the handbook for research in virtual spaces (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 135) make it the ethnographer's responsibility to recognise when they are entering a private space or conversation and act accordingly.

Other than in an offline setting, where inappropriate clothing, behaviour or an absent function can give the outsider away, in a virtual world the researcher normally does not stand out from the crowd. Therefore, the line to unintentional covert research is thin (Nardi, 2010) and its easy accessibility can even encourage intentional covert research (Sapach, 2015). However, as easy and tempting it may be to slide into comfortable anonymity and not having to deal with the impact of the researcher's overt presence in the field, it is the ethical approach to try and make one's intention clear. Introducing oneself whenever entering a new group setting can be inconvenient or outright impossible, especially since it is not common behaviour, and often the pace of the game does not allow a long introduction. Therefore, I was looking for a different approach and found the solution by literally calling myself "Researcher". An avatar's name is the main way of identification used in virtual worlds and is paid a lot of attention. While some players simply want a name that sounds good, others are looking for meaningful names that either reflect their way of playing, their personal interests or that refer to a name they use in

other online contexts. I was playing on a German speaking server, so by naming my character a German equivalent of researcher¹⁹, I permanently reminded my interlocutors of my motives. This also led to some interesting conversations, for instance when a player who would later become my closest contact wanted to know if I was interested in exploring all the hidden secrets of *Azeroth* because my name suggested this. After I had explained the true meaning of the name we chatted animatedly about our favourite hidden areas and “Easter Eggs”²⁰ for over an hour.

4.1.2. Joining a guild

In *World of Warcraft*, guilds are the centre of social interaction. To gain the full experience and insight of a player it was therefore essential for my research to join an active guild. I kept an eye on the guild recruitment advertisements in the capital cities’ chat channel from day one of my fieldwork and took notes of promising ones, but since most guilds only accepted players on the maximum level, I tried to get my character to level 110, the highest possible level during my time of fieldwork, as fast as possible before actively contacting guilds. However, on the fifth day, I spotted a message in the chat channel that advertised a guild looking for new members. It stated that the guild, despite being a raid guild, did not require a certain gear score or level to join. I liked that advertisement, as it sounded like an active guild where informal talking with the members would be possible, while I would also be able to observe the highly organised raiding process. So, earlier than I had planned for, I contacted the spokesperson of the guild. Since it was rather spontaneous, I did not plan how to introduce myself and how to describe my research interest to a layperson. Marvin, who, as I later found out, was not the “guild master”²¹, but the “raid leader” and therefore an important person in the guild, was a bit intimidated by my research interest, but, after making sure that I had a personal, private interest in the game as well, agreed on letting me introduce myself to the guild leaders. This conversation was done via *TeamSpeak*, the external voice chat application. When Marvin suggested taking the conversation to *TeamSpeak*, he assumed me to be not only familiar with the program and own the necessary equipment to use it, but he also used the common abbreviation “TS” instead of writing the full name. This is exemplary for many situations during

¹⁹ In this special case I will not provide a German translation. Characters can be tracked by their unique usernames and the online profile of my research avatar also shows my guild affiliation. Through that, my interlocutors’ characters could be found out, which would endanger their privacy.

²⁰ “Easter Eggs” is a term used in popular culture media like movies and games for hidden references to other popular franchises, stories or characters. In *World of Warcraft* there exist a plethora of them. A few examples: an archaeology professor called “Harrison Jones”, the grumpy janitor of a magical school who talks to his cat or a whole zone filled with experimental flight machines called “Area 52”.

²¹ The guild master is usually the person that founded the guild and is the official leader, even if the hierarchy might in reality not be as strict as it is in theory.

fieldwork, where detailed knowledge about *World of Warcraft*'s game mechanics, world and terms was taken for granted. Luckily, I did have enough knowledge from earlier fieldwork and playing *World of Warcraft* as a teenager to understand what Marvin was asking for. The conversation with the guild leaders felt like a job interview, as they wanted to know what I was looking for in a guild and how my research would impact their members. In the end, I was asked to wait while they talked it over with their guild members and to contact them again in a few days. Three days later I was added to the guild.

The guild numbered about 20 people, of which about ten were online almost daily. The rest was online less often, but at least managed to attend one raid every week. Although some people could always be seen online throughout the day, most members would be online in the evening, mainly between six and eleven o'clock. Completing difficult "game content", a term used by the *World of Warcraft* community to describe particularly challenging parts of the virtual world like raids and dungeons, and improving their characters was a goal shared by the entire guild and the main reason for the guild's existence. Most guild members played more than one character and had all of them added to the guild, which led to the guild numbering 87 characters. As noted before, in *World of Warcraft* it is possible for a player to create up to 18 avatars per server and it is very common to switch between several characters depending on the kind of challenge one is facing in-game or just because one needs a bit of variation. However, most players will have one avatar that they refer to as "main" that is usually their most developed one. Since my guildmates also often had several avatars and it could get a bit confusing to keep up with all the names, the guild master added the player's first name to every character's description in the guild member roster to keep track of which player was behind which character. While it was common to address each other by our first names and chat about the little things that happened during our day, people rarely talked in greater detail about their offline lives. To protect my guild members' privacy, I will only use their first names or nicknames instead of their characters' names, because it is very easy to find a player online when both their name and the server they play on are known. The same applies to all the other players that I encountered, but since I do not know their real names, I am going to replace their names with made up ones that are kept similar to their actual ones. For the same reason I will also not reveal the name I used online but will use an approximate English translation of the original German name.

When joining the guild, I encountered a problem I had not expected - Etti, the guild master, asked me to keep my research interest secret from the guild members until they got to know me better, because she feared they would be irritated by a stranger asking them personal questions.

Although I did not like the premise, I knew I would not get access if I refused her suggestion, so I agreed. Fortunately, right after she added me to the guild, Marvin, the “raid leader” and second in rank after Etti, seemed not to have gotten Etti’s wish to keep my role as a researcher from the guild and introduced me in the guild’s chat channel.

[Researcher-Thrall] has joined the guild.

21:09:29 [Etti-Thrall]: Hello Lea, welcome :)

21:09:31 [Researcher-Thrall]: Hello everyone!

21:09:40 [Yannik-Thrall]: Welcome :)

21:09:44 [Marvin-Thrall]: Hello

21:09:47 [Yikki-Thrall]: Hey

21:09:47 [Pascal-Thrall]: Welcome

21:09:57 [Silke-Thrall]: welcome

21:10:19 [Researcher-Thrall]: thank you :)

21:12:53 [Marvin-Thrall]: Lea’s name is to be taken literally, she is a passionate gamer and therefore decided to devote her master’s thesis to MMOs, so it can be possible that she will ask questions about that from time to time. (November 26, 2016, translated from German²²)

By disclosing my research interest to the guild from the very beginning he saved me from the ethical dilemma of respecting the guild master’s wishes, while simultaneously avoiding covert research. Afterwards he messaged me privately, to justify why he depicted me as a gamer first and a researcher second. He claimed that the guild members would trust me more if they saw me as a fellow gamer, who just happened to have an additional motive in playing the game. His assumption proved to be correct, as I would realise through several conversations.

My personal interest in *Word of Warcraft* was important to all the guild members I had closer contact with. “Would you also play if it was not for your research?” was a frequently asked question and it seemed vital that I am not only a researcher, but also like the virtual world and

²² 21:09:29 [Etti-Thrall]: Hallo Lea, herzlich Willkommen :)

21:09:31 [Researcher-Thrall]: Hallo zusammen!

21:09:40 [Yannik-Thrall]: Willkommen :)

21:09:44 [Marvin-Thrall]: Hallo

21:09:47 [Yikki-Thrall]: Moinsen

21:09:47 [Pascal-Thrall]: Willkommen

21:09:57 [Silke-Thrall]: willkommen

21:10:19 [Researcher-Thrall]: danke :)

21:12:53 [Marvin-Thrall]: bei Lea ist der Name Programm, sie ist leidenschaftliche Zockerin und hat sich deshalb dazu entschieden ihre Masterarbeit MMO's zu widmen, es kann also ab und an mal vorkommen das Sie was diesbezüglich fragt.

have a long, personal relationship with the game. I reckon this is due to the frequent misrepresentation of MMORPG users in popular media as anti-social and weird. By making sure I was “one of them”, my interlocutors ensured that I would not play into this stereotype. While it is true that I first played *World of Warcraft* almost ten years ago and have sufficient knowledge about the game world, I exaggerated my enthusiasm for the game a bit. I doubt I would have started to play again if it was not for my research, because playing takes a lot of time and the game itself is not entertaining enough anymore for me to warrant that. Although I expressed my familiarity with some aspects of *World of Warcraft*, I made sure to let my interlocutors know that I had little experience with advanced end game content like raiding or player versus player fights. This gave me the opportunity to take the role of the “acceptable incompetent” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 81) excusing me from not knowing some things others would take for granted and inviting people to give me advice. Some of the guild members seemed to enjoy handing out advice to less experienced players and even did so without being asked to.

4.1.3. Relations with interlocutors

One of the guild members that particularly enjoyed sharing his knowledge with less experienced players was Yannik. He spent a large amount of time online and was considered by the other guild members a particularly good player. Right after I joined, he privately messaged me to ask me about my research interests and about my relation to *World of Warcraft*. Later, he would ask me to come along to dungeons and would give me advice on how to get better. He also was the one to invite me to my first raid and could be called my “key informant”. Yannik was a male German in his twenties getting an education in a technical field. His classes tended to start around noon, so he frequently stayed online until the early morning hours.

Etti and Marvin both had leading positions in the guild. While Etti as the guild master was leading the guild socially and tried to make everyone feel welcome, Marvin as the “raid leader” was more of an authoritative figure. He was the strategist of the guild that lead the group through the weekly raiding sessions and gave commands during the raid. Etti, a woman in her early twenties living in Northern Germany, was always happy to chat and often initiated conversations. Marvin was more reserved, so I only know that he lived in Germany and attended university. Other guild members that I had more contact with involved Dirk and Pascal, avid players that were online almost all the time and who often took me along for dungeons, Yikki, one of the two “raid tanks” and therefore a person with considerable authority within the guild, and Silke, besides Etti and me the only other woman in our guild. Besides Pascal, who lived in

Western Austria, all the other guild members were living in Germany.

As I already mentioned, the guild members addressed each other by their first names, but other than that, I knew little about who my interlocutors were in “real life”. I knew their first names, I knew the age of some, sometimes people were mentioning their workplace or their school and Etti had a photo of herself on her *TeamSpeak* account, but otherwise, I knew nothing about their offline life. However, I got to know their humour, their way of playing, how they reacted to stress and pressure, their way of interacting with others, whether they were competitive and other things that were relevant within the virtual world.

4.1.4. Observing Participation

I tried to be online as much as possible throughout my fieldwork, both to be able to talk to people in the odd hours when nothing else was going on and to improve my character so I would be invited to join raids and dungeons. This added up to 168 hours (or an entire week) spent online during my fieldwork. My interaction with my interlocutors mainly consisted of hanging around in the guild chat channel, doing some quests on my own and waiting for a guild colleague to ask if someone wanted to do some dungeons. After I agreed and was added to the group, we would do at least one dungeon, but often moved on to the next one after that. Normally, we would play 30 to 120 minutes together like this, while talking to each other on *TeamSpeak*.

Due to the way *World of Warcraft* is programmed, simply observing is impossible in many situations. The moment you log in, you are already a part of the game and of the social sphere. As Nardi (2010: 34) also noticed, research in MMORPGs is always on the “participant end of participant observation”. The closest I got to “just observing” was when I was standing in the capital cities and watching the local chat channel. Naturally, this affected my research, most notable since note keeping during activities was virtually impossible. Trying to jot down impressions while needing both hands to fight a pack of computer-generated wolves is pretty much impossible. I tried to circumvent this by keeping an extensive field diary to write in whenever there was a waiting period and after I turned the game off for the day and by logging my conversations with everyone in-game, but it certainly made my fieldwork different from someone who gets to sit by the side-lines with a notebook and watch the action all day. However, being forced to participate on the same level as my interlocutors so that I could observe also gave me a deeper understanding of their daily experiences, therefore I would gladly call my method “observant participation”.

It was impossible to observe without contributing, so it took a while to be permitted to certain

areas of the field. As I already stated, all my guild members liked to raid. It was one of their central activities as a group. I did not know that at first, but rather noticed per chance on a Friday evening in late November 2016. I entered the game and noticed that 19 guild members were online and, according to the guild roster, were all located within the same raid zone. Nobody had notified me of this and nobody invited me to join them. This repeated itself every week and I was searching for a way of observing the raiding process. Once, I entered the guild's *TeamSpeak* channel while a raid was going on, in the hope of at least audially observing the event. Unfortunately, this was not very helpful, as I could not make sense of the conversation without seeing what my interlocutors saw, so this remained a one-time try. It changed a few weeks later, when I got an invitation to a raid scheduled in a few days. It was not a personal invitation, but rather an event that popped up in my in-game calendar, but it showed that Yannik, had taken the time to add me to the invitation. Of course, I took the chance to participate and finally got a glimpse into this important area of highly organised social interaction. Certain parts of the game, such as raid or dungeons, can only be studied when the researcher is part of the group entering those areas. Since groups sizes for dungeons and raids are limited, the researcher does not have the option to tag along just to watch, he or she also must fulfil their game role or would otherwise slow the group down, or, in the worst case, even hinder them from completing the dungeon or raid. So, part of me becoming a valuable member of the guild that got taken along to raids and dungeons involved learning how to play the game and how to make the best use of my avatar. That involved reading manuals and tutorials and playing the game. Yannik's invitation to join a raid was an indication that my efforts to learn the game were being noticed and approved. Successfully completing this first raid apparently was a rite of passage, because from this day on, Marvin, the raid leader, started inviting me to raids as well. Despite being welcomed into the "casual" raid team, I still was not allowed to join the "progress" team. It was an elite group of selected guild members and a few regular people from outside the guild that formed the "progress" raid team. They aspired to complete all the raids not only on the normal and heroic difficulty levels, but also on the even more demanding mythic mode. My skill and gear levels were too low to be included into their ranks and remained so for the rest of my fieldwork.

4.1.5. The question of authenticity

In my pursuit of studying virtual worlds, I have come across one particular critique or question several times: How is the ethnographer to know if the interlocutors' statements are true? A popular phrase is "on the internet, you can be anything" and many critics fear that this statement

is so true that it endangers the usefulness of gathered data. While statements about online activities can be easily examined for their truthfulness, the veracity of information about the interlocutors' offline identities is harder to confirm and sometimes it is outright impossible. This critique is often used to undermine the usefulness of research of online social relationships, as it assumes that the authenticity of people's identity performances online is insufficient and the research is therefore worthless. The following chapter is structured in a theoretical examination and deconstruction of the presumptions leading to that critique, followed by more practical reflexions.

The critique of an ethnographer's ability to confirm the truthfulness of interlocutors' accounts about their offline self presumes certain ideas about identity and authenticity. It postulates the correspondence between the online identity witnessed by the ethnographer and the performances of identity in other online or offline places. Identity in this case is defined as a singular thing, linked to a physical body with a similarly singular identity (Hine, 2000). This notion is problematic, as anthropology has long since shown that humans do not possess a single, rigid identity, but several that can change depending on the social role a person currently acts out. Identity can be understood as a flexible, fluid construct of different aspects of a person's life that is not performed the same way in every social context (Turkle, 1999).

Boellstorff (2008) states that the usefulness of anthropological research in virtual worlds is sometimes questioned by arguing that players use virtual worlds as a means for escaping reality and that their behaviour online therefore cannot be taken seriously. I have personally heard the same critique both from former university supervisors, fellow students and family members who questioned the use of online research. However, Boellstorff strongly disagrees with this argument, stating that far not every user of virtual worlds tries to escape reality by behaving radically different than they normally would. And even if this was the case, people offline also engage in behaviour that lets them escape reality, like dressing up as someone else, getting lost in a dance or reading books. Turkle (1999) similarly argues that trying out new identities or ways of presenting oneself is not something new. Before the internet, college was said to be the place to experiment with identities. Nevertheless, we must let go of the idea that identity is singular and accept that identity consists of different parts of the self. Just because some man plays as a woman online does not mean that he is deceiving anyone. He might just live out a part of himself that he does not or cannot live out offline.

Hine (2000) suggests treating authenticity not as an a priori problem, but rather researching how our informants deal with the matter and how the field regards questions of authenticity. The importance of lining up one's online identity with defining aspects of one's offline identity

varies strongly from online platform to online platform (Turkle, 1999). For some, like online dating sites, the correlation between offline and online identity is incredibly important, for instance when we think about gender or place of residence. In other contexts, those aspects play a subordinate role, for example when discussing music in a *Facebook* group. Taylor claims that in virtual worlds in-game social relations and identities are the defining features of relationships between users. Offline relations and identities still exist and can play a role, but the avatar is the basis for a player's identity in the game. An interlocutor of Taylor reflects on this situation, thinking about how other people refer to her as her avatar's name and how they only know things about her that are based on the interactions she had with them in-game: "I don't know really how old they are, what they do. It's all based on the avatar thing" (Taylor, 2006: 96). Still, her relations with them were valid, because real world identities do not matter as much as their actions online.

Verifying the truth of interlocutors' claims can be difficult or outright impossible offline, as well as online (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2015). Due to anthropology's focus on cultural meanings and practices and the possibility to fill in knowledge gaps with participant observation and interviews with other informants, it is also not typically necessary. Carter (2005) therefore proposes to view data gained from online interlocutors as authentic, unless the opposite is proven. Meeting with the interlocutor face-to-face is sometimes seen as the solution to this dilemma. However, while face-to-face interaction in some cases might be valuable to get a holistic impression of the field, for instance when online groups meet offline for a convention or a guild meeting, in other cases it might place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position and might threaten the experiential authenticity that comes from aiming to understand the world the way it is for informants (Hine, 2000).

While identity issues can already be tricky in most online contexts, virtual worlds take it even further. Most offer the user the possibility to create more than one avatar and it is indeed a common practice to switch between characters. There are multiple reasons for users to do so. For some, it offers a possibility to get away from the social responsibilities attached to their main avatar and play alone for some time (Taylor, 2006), while others might use it to engage in behaviour that they do not want associated with their primary game character. The most common reason, however, is for users to try out other ways of playing the game, for instance by being a "healer" instead of a "damage dealer" for a change. Other users generally cannot know whether two avatars are being controlled by the same person if this person does not share this information. This can make social relations online complicated, so that in many virtual worlds it is *bon ton* to readily share information about one's multiple avatars (Boellstorff et al.,

2012; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009; Taylor, 2006). Some people even try to make their avatar's names similar so others can easily guess the connection between them, like a player I knew that named all his avatars after different soft drink brands. The handbook for research in virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012) suggests that the easiest way to deal with this is to follow the field's lead. If multiple avatars are treated as the same person, the anthropologist should do the same.

For my own fieldwork that meant that the relationships with my interlocutors were kept strictly online because my guild never organised offline guild meetups and all their contacts with each other were kept online as well. The guild kept track of members' various "twinks", as additional avatars besides the main playing character of a user are often called, by adding a note stating the player's first name to every character's description in the guild roster. Since we addressed each other with our first names anyways, it did not make any difference if a guild member changed their playing character. The exception to my "strictly online" stance were two interview partners with a long history with *World of Warcraft* who also happened to be close friends of mine. Those two were not affiliated with my guild, but I interviewed them towards the end of my research when I tried to verify whether my experiences with the guild were similar to those other people made with their own guilds.

4.2. Data Analysis

For the analysis of my data I used primarily *Atlas.ti*, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) based on Grounded Theory. However, Grounded Theory was not my choice of method for analysing the data. Instead I followed the instructions of the *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Johnny Saldana (2009) which explains several styles and techniques of coding for various types of qualitative research. For my research questions, I found attribute and holistic coding, as well as value coding immensely helpful for the first cycle of coding.

Choosing attribute coding to start with was particularly useful because it gave me an overview of what kind of data I collected. "It is the notation [...] of basic descriptive information such as: the fieldwork setting, participant characteristics or demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, health), data format (e.g., interview, field note, document), time frame [...] and other variables of interest for qualitative [...] analysis" (Saldana, 2009: 55). Following this first step, I went on to sort through my data by applying codes to larger units of data that described their content, titling them, for example, "guild recruitment", "healers" or "progress". Those units were sometimes as large as entire *Facebook* posts and other times were only a few sentences

long. Saldana calls this holistic coding and suggests doing it to get a sense of the overall contents and possible future categories. Finally, I used value coding as the last method for my first coding cycle. It is explained by Saldana (2009: 86) as “[c]oding [that] assesses a participant's integrated value, attitude, and belief systems at work.” This method was important for my understanding of the users’ experiences as it forced me to phrase my codes from their point of view and often in their own words, since many codes ended up being quotes from interlocutors that perfectly summed up an experience or an observation, like “we all started knowing nothing” or “you have to stay quiet and unnoticed, otherwise you trigger all the asshats”. Whenever I could clearly see someone expressing values, opinions or beliefs regarding *World of Warcraft*, I coded it accordingly. Those included, for example, “value: being helpful”, “opinion: carrying someone else spoils the game” or “assumption: toxic people are young”. Sometimes I encountered snippets of data that did not precisely fit into value coding but that I wanted to document anyways because I anticipated them becoming useful later and I wanted to be able to easily find them again. In those cases, I applied simple descriptive codes like “difference between older/newer players” or “dreading peoples’ reactions”.

In the second cycle I used focused and pattern coding to make sense of the preliminary codes from the first cycle. The general goal of the second coding cycle is to reduce the broad variety of codes into fewer categories and to discover themes and connections between codes. Saldana (2009: 150) defines pattern coding as a method to developing the “[...] ‘meta-code’ - the category label that identifies similarly coded data. Pattern codes not only organise the corpus but attempts to attribute meaning to that organization.” Focused coding serves a similar purpose, concentrating on finding the most important or frequent codes from the first coding cycle and forming them into useful categories. Often, focused coding concentrates on formulating process-based categories, often signalled by the use of “-ing”-words like “finding”. My categories emerged both from the data and from the theoretical background of this study. Some categories formulated through this process involved “assuming the skill of other players”, “avoiding failure” or “choosing group/guild members”. During analysis, a total of 724 codes were applied to the data and from those, I formed 66 categories. I also used another program for the data analysis process - to make sense of the first, very extensive survey, I analysed it using *SPSS* and later imported the answers to the open survey questions to *Atlas.ti* for further examination.

Image 3: A screenshot of *Atlas.ti* showing a *Facebook* post and some of the applied codes.

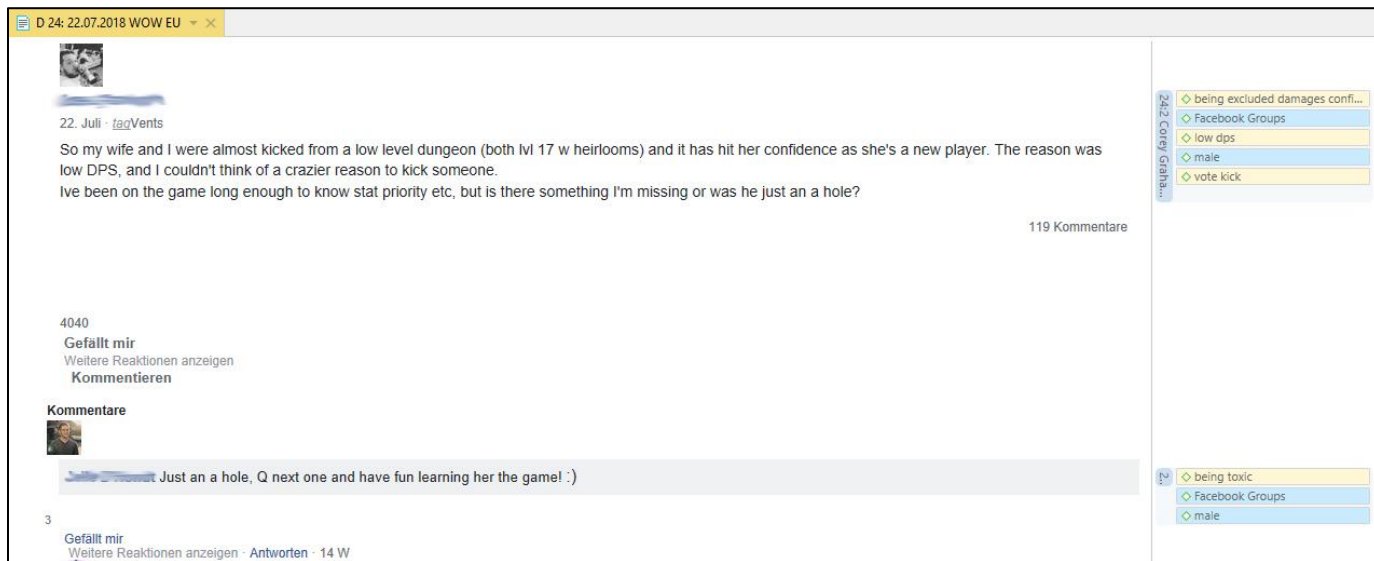
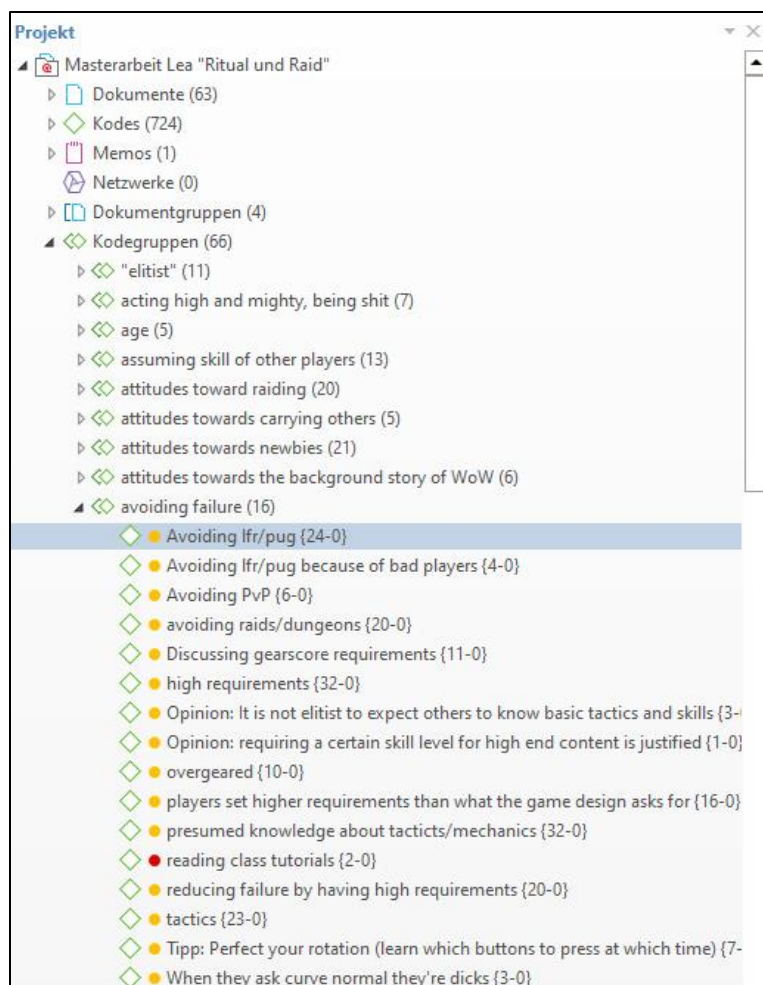


Image 4: A screenshot of *Atlas.ti* showing the roster of the documents, codes and categories of my thesis with the codes organised into the category “avoiding failure” being shown.



5. The Raid and the Ritual

After introducing the reader to *World of Warcraft* and the theoretical concepts that are used in this thesis, this is finally the part where both are brought together. For a start it seems adequate to call the research questions of this thesis to mind since they will be used to structure this chapter. There are four of them and a fifth one to tie them all together:

- 1) What is the role of the raid in *World of Warcraft* community?
- 2) How do users experience social pressure in relation to raids?
- 3) Why is there social pressure on players?
- 4) How can the raid be understood as a ritual-like event in the context of *World of Warcraft*?

And lastly:

- 5) How can concepts of ritual studies explain players' experiences with social pressure in connection with raids?

5.1. The role of the raid in the *World of Warcraft* community

The subject of the raid has been raised a few times in this thesis by now, but now it is time for a more detailed introduction. In video game lingo a raid is typically defined like this:

A raid is a type of mission in a video game where a number of people attempt to defeat either: (a) another number of people at player-vs-player (PVP), (b) a series of computer-controlled enemies (non-player characters; NPCs) in a player-vs-environment (PVE) battlefield, or (c) a very powerful boss (superboss). This type of objective is most commonly seen in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and usually, but not necessarily, occurs within an instance dungeon in that genre. (raid (gaming), 2019)

5.1.1. Definitions and Explanations

In the context of *World of Warcraft*, raids are understood to be PvE events set in an “instance”. There are also large scale PvP events that require a lot of coordination and tactics, but those are called “battlegrounds” and are not included when players talk about raids²³. Instances are special areas in *World of Warcraft* where a group can interact with a part of the world privately; that is, without interference from other parties. It is also a respite from the global PvP

²³ Although some players may talk about “raiding” when they plan a large-scale attack on an enemy city, those events are much rarer and less important to most players than the usual PvE raids.

environment on a PvP server. In a way, instances create a private copy of a room for every single person or group who wants to enter it. This ensures that if ten parties try to enter an instance at the same time, they do not find themselves cramped together in the same room, having to fight for resources, but each gets their own. Instancing makes sure that a group does not have to fight off other player who might want to defeat the same bosses at the same time and allows them to progress in their own time. It is not only used for raids and dungeons, but also for other areas of the virtual world that might get too crowded otherwise, but raids and dungeons are always instanced and so intertwined with the term that many players use dungeon and instance interchangeably.

It is time to explain the difference between raids and dungeons. In a way, dungeons are “raids light” - they also feature a series of much harder opponents than are usually found in the general game world, they also require a team and good teamwork and they also give better rewards like more experience points and high-level equipment. But dungeons are done with a group of maximum five players versus the ten, 20 or even 40 players needed for a raid, they generally can be completed in a fraction of the time a raid would take and players can participate (and succeed) in dungeons from level 15 onwards while raids were always reserved for end-level users. There is no limit to how often a player can complete a single dungeon per week, but there is a limit when it comes to raids. A player can only gain the rewards for defeating the bosses in a raid once a week and must wait for the weekly “reset” of the virtual world before he or she has another chance. This is an account-wide block, meaning that a player cannot simply use their second playing character to try and get the rewards.

Like many aspects of the game, dungeons have changed and developed over the years. Starting with the sixth expansion pack called “Legion”, *Blizzard* introduced the “mythic” and “mythic plus” functions. Dungeons and raids had two difficulty levels even before the introduction of mythic - normal and heroic. In all the difficulty levels the basic setup of the dungeon stays the same, but with increasing difficulty the opponents gain health points, cause more damage and might even get some new abilities - but they also leave better rewards (aka loot) behind. The introduction of mythic plus was a literal gamechanger because for the first time there was next to no limit to how difficult a dungeon could get. To unlock the next difficulty level, a group of players first must complete the dungeon on the mythic level within a set time frame. This time frame was also a new addition that made matters more challenging. If the group succeeds, one of them randomly receives a “keystone” to a random dungeon of the current expansion. The group can either immediately carry on in the same setup or separate and the person with the keystone has time until the weekly reset to find a new group. Completing a dungeon with a

keystone within the time limit grants another, more difficult keystone with a higher level, failing to complete the dungeon within the time frame but succeeding in defeating the bosses grants a keystone with a lower level. Additional to the increased difficulty associated with the level of the keystone there are also “affixes”. An affix is an additional property that affects the way enemies within the dungeon behave and appear right away starting from level two. If a keystone has an affix listed on it, then all important enemies in that dungeon will inherit this property. Affixes change weekly on a set rotation. The higher the level of the keystone, the more pieces of loot the group gets, which serves as a powerful motivator. During my fieldwork level 25 was generally accepted as the limit, although most players did not even make it past level ten. Even the very best players in my guild were incredibly proud when they successfully completed a level 15 keystone, and rightfully so. There are some more functions and rules surrounding mythic plus dungeons and keystones, but it is not necessary for this thesis to go into even greater detail. It is important however to point out the significance of the introduction of mythic plus dungeons for the player community. Players could finally tackle demanding, but highly rewarding game challenges in relatively small groups in relatively little time. This allowed players to circumvent the complicated, time intensive organisational process of forming a raid party with dozens of people and spending hours within the raid itself, if they wished to do so.

As with dungeons, raids also come in various levels of difficulty ranging from “looking for raid” to mythic. During my fieldwork, raids did not have a system like mythic plus dungeons with endlessly increasing levels of difficulty and there existed only four intensities, but those were hard enough. The easiest version is called “looking for raid” or “LFR”. It is a type of raid where players can find and join a random raid group through a device called the “dungeon finder”, which is a standard tool of *World of Warcraft* integrated into the user interface that randomly matches up players for dungeons and easy raids. A player simply needs to open the appropriate window, state whether they want to do a particular dungeon or raid or are fine with any dungeon or raid, choose what role they can fulfil in the group (if they want to play damage dealer, tank or healer) and wait for the game to match them up. In the early days of *World of Warcraft* this function did not yet exist and players had to form groups by looking for members via the various chat channels or by asking the people they already knew. Tales of how long this would take and how annoying it was are still told to this day and most players seem to appreciate the convenience of the dungeon finder, even if it comes with its own set of problems that will be discussed later in this thesis. But let us look at the LFR again. It is a much easier version of the normal raid difficulty level with enemies causing less damage and some boss mechanics missing. In exchange, the possible rewards are lower as well. LFR is the only version of raids

that players can enter as a randomly assembled group via the dungeon finder. The next difficulty levels are normal, heroic and mythic, each one being more challenging and rewarding than the one before. All the levels starting with normal require players to form their own groups, either by advertising them in the chat channels, by asking friends or guild members to join or by listing them in the dungeon finder. Aside from the randomly formed groups for normal and heroic level dungeons and LFR, the dungeon finder also allows premade groups to look for members. Those entries state how many people are still needed and are shown together with a short text of introduction that usually lists what the group expects from potential teammates and which dungeon or raid they intend to run. Interested users can either apply straight through the dungeon finder or personally message the group leader. Since different dungeons and raids have different levels of difficulty, there often exist minimum requirements defined by Blizzard that a player must fulfil before being able to apply for a certain dungeon or raid. Usually, those requirements are about the level or gear score of an avatar and are supposed to make sure that the player characters are developed enough to have a good chance at succeeding in the dungeon or raid. While the dungeon finder tool for finding random groups for LFR or normal and heroic dungeons and raids uses the standard minimum requirements defined by *Blizzard*, premade groups looking for members can make up their own requirements for potential recruits. Generally, those requirements deal with a minimum gear score or require experience in the specific raid or dungeon, but in theory, a group could also specify that they are exclusively looking for candidates named Lisa. Premade groups looking for a few players to complete their ranks are called “pick up groups” or “PUGs” and the term is used both for raid and dungeon groups.

5.1.2. Raiding and the community

Despite the advent of mythic plus dungeons, raids remain very important and are seen by many players as the centre of the virtual world, as exemplified by this player who answered to the question “what role does raiding play in your personal relationship with WoW and the gaming community?”:

A big role. Its the base of everything i do ingame. Thats the reason im in a guild and have People to do all sorts of content with. Itsvthe reason i spend time on gearing my char. Its the reason i research my class and the raid to always preform as good as possible. It gives everything i do in wow a purpose. (November 5, 2018)

My guild, which described themselves as a “casual raid guild”, had two scheduled raids each week. One of them was open to the whole guild, including me. This was the practice and “farming”²⁴ raid. The other was only for the chosen and capable few who tried very hard to push the boundaries of their abilities and advance to increasingly difficult areas of the game world. Many of my guildmates participated in numerous mythic plus runs during the week and they showed immense pride when they managed to reach a new level, but it never appeared to be as serious to them as the weekly raids were. During mythic plus dungeons they chatted via *TeamSpeak* and they kept joking with each other, except only for the few very difficult situations that demanded their full concentration. During a raid the entire party of 20 to 30 people was concentrated and silent, only the “guild officers” being allowed to speak. Also, my guildmates did frequently switch between their main character and their various secondary characters when doing mythic plus dungeons, while they generally stuck to their best equipped and tested main character for raids. To my knowledge, mythic plus runs were not usually planned ahead of time and were more of a spontaneous event. Raids, on the other hand, were scheduled events set on an exact day of the week and were announced in the guild calendar requiring attendees to sign up.

Those differing attitudes towards dungeons and raids can partly be explained by looking at what distinguishes the raid from normal to mythic plus dungeons. To put it very briefly, raids use up more resources. They are very time intensive, on one hand because of the needed preparation and organisation beforehand and on the other hand because raids themselves take longer than dungeons. There are more and stronger opponents, longer cutscenes between the fights and the group needs longer to recharge after each encounter. Players are also expected to use ability enhancing food, drinks, spells or objects for raids that often disappear after consumption or need to be recharged with expensive materials. If the entire raid group fails to defeat an enemy and dies (generally called “wiping”) all the spent time and materials are for nothing, making raiding a much more high-risk venture than dungeons. Another very important criterium is the number of involved players. Raid groups are at least twice as large as dungeon groups and, naturally, with increasing numbers the difficulty of organising rises as well. Hence, many raid groups have strict policies regarding player behaviour. My guild required players who could not make it on the day of the raid despite signing up for it to tell the raid leader as soon as possible so that he could find a replacement. Even if it was not an explicit rule, it was implied

²⁴ Farming is a term used in gaming culture that refers to the collecting of resources needed to craft objects or power special abilities. Often, it has connotations of boredom because farming frequently consists of long hours of repeating the same action over and over again, for instance killing the same type of enemy or picking the same flower.

that failing to take part too often would result in losing your fixed place in the guild raid. Just the very existence of the raid leader, whose role before and during the raid could be likened to a general, shows that a high level of organisation and structure is needed for successful raiding. Dungeons, on the other hand, can usually be completed without someone to coordinate and direct the entire group. My guild had also several rules for how to behave during a raid and how to prepare for it. A single undisciplined or bad player can threaten the success of the whole raid, wasting everyone's time and resources. Learning how to work as a capable team can be a challenging task, but, as my guild master Etti said, if you succeed it is an incredible feeling:

It's like this, when you are at a really tough part, grinding your teeth and really giving your best and everyone is giving everything and the order comes to drink another potion and everything is exactly timed and there is this tension and the stress and the nervousness and you ask yourself: will we finally make it this time? And then we make it. It is an incredible high. And most importantly, it is a joint high. Because everyone, even the ones that died, everyone worked hard for this victory. And then all of us, 15 or 20 people, are celebrating so hard when we finally made it and this makes for a really, really strong feeling of community. (Etti, January 8, 2017, translated from German²⁵)

This feeling of accomplishment and community is what draws so many players towards raids and dungeons and keeps them trying over and over again after the group gets defeated the first, the fifth or the 20th time. Because they know, when they finally make it, the high will be amazing and might even last for days.

During her research of *World of Warcraft* Bonnie Nardi also noticed the intense feelings of community that raiding could create and how close members of a raid group could become. "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, 2010: 119). She argues that raids resemble Huizinga's game theory concept of the "magic circle" that claims that games happen in a space separated from daily life. Huizinga's concept has prominently been used to describe virtual worlds in general (Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2005; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009) but Nardi goes a step further and describes the raid as "a magic circle within the magic circle" (Nardi, 2010: 2018). This extra barrier to

²⁵ "Also, das ist schon so, wenn du an einer richtig schweren Stelle bist, und dir da die Zähne ausbeißt und dich so anstrengst, und jeder noch mal angespürt wird, und gesagt wird vorher noch mal nen Trank rein, und das muss genauso getimed sein, und diese Spannung und der Stress und die Nervosität, schaffen wirs mal? Und dann klappt das. Das ist ein unglaubliches High. Und vor allem ist das ein gemeinsames High. Weil auch die, die tot waren, jeder hat was dazu beigetragen, und wir sind dann 15 oder 20 Leute so am Feiern, wenns endlich geklappt hat, und das ist ein sehr, sehr starkes Gemeinschaftsgefühl."

the rest of the game world allows the players within the raid to concentrate entirely on each other and the task at hand without any interference from outside. It creates a strong feeling of belonging and it also highlights the importance of raiding.

The following section will deliver more insight into how players see raiding in the context of *World of Warcraft* and explain the role of the raid in *World of Warcraft* community. To a large part, analysing how players talk about raids in *Facebook* groups was used to gain these insights, but sources also include frequent answers to interview questions and discussions with guild members while playing online.

As already mentioned, for many users the raid is essential to *World of Warcraft*. When asked “If you imagine *World of Warcraft* as a circle, with the most important aspects of the game in the centre, where would you place raiding?” around 80 percent of my ten interviewees replied that they would place raiding in the centre or near the centre. Many added that the social aspect of the game also belongs in the centre and that they considered it to be closely related to raiding, which is hardly surprising, given that being able to play with others is what makes many *World of Warcraft* players choose the MMORPG over normal single-player computer games.

Raiding requires players to work as a team and, just like in a professional work setting, teamwork needs a lot of preparation and organising, which also means sticking to a schedule and dedicating large amounts of time to training. This is crucial not only to the success of the raid group, but also to how well the individual player is received. A common sentiment in the community is that the more someone sticks to a schedule and the more time they dedicate, the more serious they take the game. Being “serious” about *World of Warcraft* was often seen as the opposite to being a “casual” player - someone who does not care about the virtual world as much as others and therefore likely has less success in the game. Discussions about where to draw the line between a casual player and their opposite - the “hardcore” player - were rather common in the two *Facebook* groups that I followed and there was no clear consensus. Some argued that casual players simply spent less time on *World of Warcraft* than their counterparts, others claimed that casual players cared less in general and put in less effort. Then there were some that maintained that casual players might spend just as much time and care as much as so called hardcore or “progress” players, it was just that they chose to concentrate on different aspects of the game - social relationships, collections, exploration or story. In contrast, hardcore players were said to care more about achievements and competitions in raids or player versus player fights. Particularly common were arguments about whether it was possible to distinguish a casual player from a hardcore player by looking at the item level of their character. The item level of a character, often used synonymously with gear score, is the average level of all their

17 equipment pieces. The higher the item level of a sword, boot or necklace, the more powerful it generally is. The same can be said about player characters - the higher the general item level, the stronger the character. It must be noted that the equipment also must match the abilities and demands of the character type. Wearing the wrong equipment greatly diminishes a character's strength. For instance, a warrior wearing a high-level cloth robe intended for a magician will be weaker than a warrior with a low-level chain mail armour and a character type depending on speed will likely profit from choosing a lower level piece of armour with powerful "haste" boosting qualities over a higher level piece without them. However, those subtleties are considered basic knowledge and players are expected to equip their characters accordingly. High-level gear can usually be gained by defeating difficult opponents in dungeons or raids, the more difficult, the better the loot. It is hardly surprising that players with a high gear score tend to raid more often than those with a low one. This adds to the casual versus hardcore discussion, as this reply to a *Facebook* post that asked to define which item levels were considered casual or hardcore exemplifies:

1. Casual - people who don't commit to a schedule, maybe pugs, maybe in a guild who raid casually, whenever the whim takes them. May find these people around 'normal ilvls'...875-900
2. Semi casual - people who commit to a schedule but don't want strict progression. Raids are more relaxed and less structured, but they try harder content when it naturally arises. People probably have an ilvl between 900 and 920.
3. Hardcore - these people commit to reaching end content through a strict schedule and structured raid sessions. They are able to dedicate themselves to grind, theorycrafting²⁶ and farming to be the best they can. Ilvls probably 920 upwards. (*Facebook* post, August 13, 2017)

This comment brings together a lot of common conceptions about the raid. First, that fruitful raiding needs organisation and dedication, as well as a lot of time. Second, that casual players are raiding less often and less successfully. Third, that raids are the "end content" of *World of Warcraft*, the most difficult, most rewarding, most prestigious part of the virtual world that is only available to players on the maximum level.

²⁶ Theorycrafting is a term for the mathematical analysis of game mechanics to discover optimal strategies and tactics.

The third notion is widely accepted to be true in *World of Warcraft* community, even by users who dislike raiding. Raids are only available to players when they reach the maximum level. Getting a character from level one to the current maximum level of 120 can take several weeks, but many claim that the maximum level is where the “real” game begins:

Leveling to max level is the journey. Gearing up, Dungeons, Raids, PvP is the game.
(Facebook post, October 30, 2018)

In the so-called endgame the users fine-tune their characters with equipment of increasing quality, refine their gaming skills, collect mounts, pets and achievements or perfect their professions like mining or alchemy. *World of Warcraft* is a game without ending, typical for MMORPGs that aim to capture their player base’s attention for as long as possible. *Blizzard* apparently is especially skilled at keeping their users entertained. In my survey with 193 participants over 53 percent stated that they had been playing the game for over nine years. Even if it is normal to create a new character and go through the process of levelling again from time to time, most players choose one avatar on maximum level as their “main” and play a few less well-developed and equipped characters on the side. The term maximum level can sometimes be misleading when it comes to *World of Warcraft* because there are always ways to improve a character by equipping better gear. Like climbing from level one to 120, this takes a lot of time and effort and it gets increasingly difficult the higher the numbers get. Unlike the basic levelling process, “gearing up” also requires a good dose of luck since opponents do not automatically leave behind all their valuable loot, but they are subject to random chance. Especially when it comes to the most valuable virtual objects like mounts, pets or powerful equipment, a player might have to kill a boss several dozen times until they get lucky. The so-called “drop rate” ranges, depending on the rarity and value of the virtual object, from almost a 100% when it comes to cheap and useless objects to an incredibly small 0,03% for some mounts like for instance the “Big Love Rocket”. Of course, all those percentages and drop rates are not official, but are found out by motivated “theorycrafters” who delight in discovering the mechanics behind the virtual world.

Therefore, the endless search for better gear during the endgame is also one of the reasons why many players raid despite not overly enjoying it - it is the only activity left to do with friends that everyone benefits from. Of course, users can also do quests and collect things, but those are more specialised activities that do not appeal to everyone, while everyone profits from better equipment. The social aspect of raiding is a strong motivator - quite a few users stated that they only joined raids due to demand from their friends or guild members. One player stated in their

response to my survey that they partook in raids “[...] Because I’m guild leader and a good proportion of my guild wanted to participate in raids, so I organised them.” They added “[I] enjoy the process generally, but [I am] fairly relaxed... loot doesn’t concern me, and I’m there for the group experience rather than personal character development” (November 5, 2018).

However, not every player enjoys raiding. There are many who avoid it for various reasons, ranging from disliking the stressful boss fights to dreading the reactions of their team members to possible failures, and there are even more who do raid, yet dislike large parts of it. Even though raiding is often a positive, fun activity with friends for many players, there are also dark sides. The next chapter will discuss what kind of negative experiences are connected with raiding.

5.2. Users and their experiences of social pressure and social violence

Every other week or so, there would be a post on one of the two *Facebook* groups that I followed about how “toxic” the community of *World of Warcraft* players was. Someone would either just complain about how they had been wronged or they would try to start a discussion or even a movement to end the “toxicity”. Those kinds of posts tended to gain a lot of attention. People replied and tried to defend the community, would tell their own stories or would mock the original poster. In the majority of cases, dungeons and raids were in some form connected to the negative experiences people talked about. The notable exception is “griefing” (or “ganking”), a type of behaviour where players are intentionally targeted and annoyed by (usually) stronger players by following them around, killing them repeatedly, hindering their progress and similar behaviour. This kind of behaviour is naturally much more prevalent on servers that allow open-world PvP and was therefore of little concern for the users on my PvE server, why it will not be discussed further in this text²⁷.

The remaining experiences that were described as toxic can be summed up into exclusion, expulsion and verbal abuse. Even though sometimes players offended others seemingly randomly in public chat channels, most of the toxic behaviours seemed to happen in relation with group activities like dungeons, raids or, more rarely, battle grounds and other organised PvP activities. The following section will examine each part of the “triad of toxicity” in more detail.

²⁷ For more information on griefing please refer to Achterbosch, Miller, and Vamplew (2013), as well as Foo and Koivisto (2004) and Humphreys and Zwart (2012)

5.2.1. Verbal Abuse

In online gaming contexts, verbal abuse is often called “flaming”. Chesney, Coyne, Logan and Madden, who studied antisocial behaviour in the virtual world *Second Life*, describe it as such:

A term related to cyberbullying is flaming, the act of an online community sending negative messages, ‘flames’, to someone who has broken implicit or explicit rules. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes a flame, leaving some to simply state ‘flaming is in the eye of the beholder’ (Thompson & Foulger, 1996); however, often, authors agree that it is characterized by profanity, obscenity and insults that inflict harm (Reinig et al., 1998; Alonzo & Aiken, 2004). (Chesney et al., 2009: 530)

In *World of Warcraft*, flaming can take many forms, but the most common one seems to be getting called names like “noob” (deriving from newbie) or idiot, getting told to quit the game, learn to play or, in the worst cases, to “kys” (kill yourself) in group settings like dungeons or raids. Over the years, *Blizzard* has tried to install several measures against verbal abuse like chat filters and a report system, but both are far from fail proof. The “mature language filter”, for instance, can be turned on and off by the individual player and simply changes words that the game engine recognises as potentially problematic into random punctuation marks and other inoffensive signs, ending up with something like #@!!\$^\$. However, most players disable this filter since it neither can filter all offensive phrases or words, nor can it recognise intentional misspellings or spaces left between the letters (for instance, typing “d amn” instead of “damn”), but it can also distort jokes or enjoyable swearing with friends. The report system does work a little better because all reports are looked at by “game masters”, *Blizzard* employees who are the digital referees, policemen and janitors of the virtual world. They have the power to issue warnings and to ban users temporarily or forever. Nevertheless, it seems that reporting someone is often seen as the last resort and is not used lightly. In my personal experience, the effort to report every single person who called me an idiot in a dungeon with a group of random people would simply have been too much, it was easier and faster to shrug it off and ignore them. Judging from the amount of people who told others to ignore and block rude players, I was not alone with that sentiment. One player had a particularly radical approach and advised to block every member of a randomly assembled party as soon as possible to avoid even the potential of receiving offending comments:

Or do as you do in lol + dota . Join a group and automatically block every one (*Facebook* post, March 7, 2017)

Unlike with verbal abuse, the other two parts of the “trial of toxicity”, exclusion and expulsion, are not per se abusive behaviour and can absolutely be used in a constructive, useful and positive way. They are, however, very prone to exploitation and misuse.

5.2.2. Exclusion

World of Warcraft is a MMORPG and as such, being part of a group or doing tasks with others is a crucial part of the game. In theory, the official rules and requirements put into place by *Blizzard* make sure that everyone can find others to play with, but the player community often makes up their own set of rules on top of that. One aspect where this is especially noticeable is admittance to dungeons and raids. When I started my fieldwork in November 2016, heroic level dungeons required characters to have an average item level of 810 and to use the raid finder to sign up for the LFR raid one needed an item level of 825. Below that level, one could not enter the zone. More difficult dungeons and raids required players to form groups on their own and allowed them to set their own minimum requirements, which often led to exaggerated prerequisites and animated debates.

During her research, Nardi (2010) also noticed an aspect of raiding that was particularly difficult to navigate and would often lead to arguments. In her case, it was the distribution of loot. Like in the case of inflated item level requirements, *Blizzard* stayed out of loot decisions and players had to solve those issues amongst each other. Nardi recounts that her guild implemented a rule that non-guild raid members were last in line when it came to desirable loot, even if they performed better than guild members or played a more important role. If one of the non-guild players would have had a problem with this system and would have complained to a game master, they would have been told to look for another group if they did not like this group’s policies. Similarly, users can create groups for a normal level raid with a minimum item level requirement of 860 even though the equipment found in said raid only goes up to item level 850. Often enough, this creates a problem that players are well aware of, as this *Facebook* comment shows:

Yeh, same morons that think you need 890 gear to do normal Mythics for quests. Got kicked so many times because I had 850 and never did it before. Because I can't do them and have no gear from them. SEE THE CIRCLE? (*Facebook* post, March 7, 2017)

Exaggerated requirements effectively exclude new and inexperienced users from high end game content, or at least make it much harder for them to get to a level where they are accepted into groups. With increasing time and additional game content being released, most players

accumulate better and better equipment, raising the average item level of the entire community, which in turn leads to rising minimum requirements for raid groups. When I started to play in November 2016, pick up groups would often ask for item level 860 for normal mythic level dungeons. Half a year and two patches²⁸ later, 880 had become a new standard. At this point, new players had an even harder time to find groups and they felt excluded and left out. On the other hand, users who admitted to setting high requirements argued that they had every right to pick their group members and preferred characters with high item levels because it was seen as an indication that the player had experience and could be helpful to the group. The following two comments showcase this sentiment:

I make those kind of groups. What's the big deal? I just don't want noob dps in my grps [AN: meaning something like “I just don’t want inexperienced people lowering the overall level of my group] (*Facebook post*, January 20, 2017)

I think the item level system kinda sucks to be honest. But yeah dps comes from stats not item level. When list up a pug I do always put a min req of itemlevel 875 ish. This is only because I'm more likely to get that good dps and Experience. (*Facebook post*, November 28, 2016)

Often enough, users who had experienced the exclusion at one point would continue the practice once they managed to increase their item level. This player said that he knew how it felt to be rejected and left out, but they argued that after they managed to overcome this, they did not always want to spend time helping players with lower item levels:

I've been on both sides of the scale, I got a dry patch where I was stuck around 850 llvl, and honestly it was sometimes really deflating constantly being denied, regardless of the reason it can make the player behind the screen feel inadequate. I've also been in the situation where I just want to get shit done. I guess I'm just speaking out because I have been there and I know how disheartening it can be when you just want to enjoy content but you're told you're not good enough, not in those words but still! (*Facebook post*, January 20, 2017)

²⁸ A patch is an update and addition to the virtual world that fixes known problems and usually adds some new functions and areas (often new raids) to the virtual world. “Legion”, the expansion of the time of my fieldwork, saw three major patches and several smaller ones from August 2016 to January 2018.

Blizzard giving players this freedom to set their own rules and act according to their own norms, sometimes leads to frustration and arguments but, naturally, also makes research a lot more interesting for social anthropologists.

5.2.3. Expulsion

Expulsion is closely connected to exclusion. In a way, it is exclusion after an initial acceptance into a group. *World of Warcraft* has a function which lets groups members vote to remove another member from the group without the member's consent. This function, usually called "vote kick", was implemented into the game with the introduction of the dungeon finder tool. *Blizzard* introduced the vote kick function as a tool "[...] in the event a member of a party is not performing to the expectations of the other members" (Wowpedia, n.d.). Before the introduction of the dungeon finder tool, players had to manually look for party members which ensured that they did talk before forming a group and, at least in theory, reduced the chance of ending up with people they did not approve of. The new tool for randomised group assemblage changed that, forcing *Blizzard* to give players an option to remove unwanted group members - the vote kick function was born. Early on, this device got mixed reactions - while some appreciated the possibility of removing party members that acted out, others felt that the function was abused by people to troll²⁹. This division seems to exist until this day. On one hand, people consider kicking with no apparent or justified reason to be toxic behaviour, but on the other hand, being forced to work with incompetent players is often seen as an unreasonable demand as well. Interestingly, rudeness or other behavioural issues like that are not usually the justifications players name for kicking someone, most of the time it boils down to incompetence, inexperience or internet connection issues. In short, when they are not useful to the group, players chance being removed from the group. When I asked my guild master Etti about her experiences with the vote kick function, her first association was about being a liability to the group, only at the end she added that kicking was also useful to get rid of verbally abusive players:

I think, I have been kicked before. In those cases, it was because I had gone afk [AN: away from keyboard, aka leaving your computer while remaining online] and I have to say, I understand that they say 'I won't wait half an hour'. I don't know, after five minutes I also get impatient if someone is just standing there. So, yeah, I also did it a few times. Usually I'm like 'come one, don't be like that', but I do get really angry as

²⁹ Marshall (2020: 140) explains: "The term 'trolling' is often used to refer to online harassment or disruption."

well if people... well, for example, when you're out and about and there is a rogue [AN: a damage dealing type of character] and he does less damage than me as a healer. For example, he makes 56k dps. The first thing I'm looking at, what I think to myself, is, sure, he just doesn't have gear, he's basically naked and is here to farm the gear. So that his damage is getting somewhere. But then I check and realise his gear is 880, just like me and he's actually a damage dealer, then I get angry. Because I find it impossible if you sign up, could actually do something well, but you stupidly set your character on 'follow' and let everyone else do the work. This gets me really, really mad. And those people, that's where I vote pro kicking as well. Or those people, I noticed that with Frenchmen recently, who curse and insult people according to the motto 'nobody understands me, nobody understands my language anyway, therefore I can behave like shit'. With those people I also think that. Because I just find it unacceptable when someone says 'I can afford that'. (Etti, January 8, 2017, translated from German³⁰)

The rules behind vote kicking are rather simple - anyone in the group can initiate a vote kick. When someone wants to remove a player from the group, they right-click on the player's portrait frame in the party user interface and select "vote to kick". A message window appears, asking the initiating player to enter a reason for the kick. This reason is presented to the other party members with the option to accept the reason and kick the player or deny the reason and keep the player in the group. If most of the group choose to kick the player, they will be automatically removed. The kicked player does not see the reason given by the player who initiated the vote kick. The "party leader" (usually by default the person that created the party) has special rights and can kick any party member at any time without needing to bother with the voting process. Just as with the process of selecting party members, *Blizzard* also stays out of potential arguments following vote kicks, stating that they do not wish to tell their players how to manage

³⁰“Also ich glaube, ich wurde schon mal rausgeschmissen. Das war dann aber, weil ich afk gegangen bin und da muss ich sagen, ich versteh das, dass sie sagen 'ich warte doch keine halbe Stunde' Nach keine Ahnung 5 Minuten werde ich ja auch ungeduldig, wenn jemand einfach nur rumsteht. Also, und ich selber habs jetzt schon ein paar Mal gemacht. Normalerweise bin ich so dass ich sage 'ach nun sei doch nicht so', aber ich werd halt auch sehr wütend, wenn Leute... also, wenn man jetzt zum Beispiel unterwegs ist, und da ist ein Schurke dabei und der macht weniger Schaden als ich als Heiler. Der macht zum Beispiel 56k dps. Das erste worauf ich kucke ist, was ich mir denke, ist ja, der hat einfach kein Gear, der ist hier praktisch nackt drin und ist hier, um das zu farmen. Damit sein Schaden auch wirklich was wird. Wenn ich dann aber nachgucke und feststelle, dass der genau 880 gear ist, also genauso wie ich und eigentlich Damage Dealer ist, dann bin ich sauer. Weil ich find das halt unmöglich, dass du dich anmeldest, gut was machen könntest und aber einfach nur blöd auf Folgen stellst und die anderen arbeiten lässt. das macht mich richtig, richtig wütend. Und solche Leute, da vote ich dann eben auch fürs rausschmeißen. Oder eben so Leute, da sind mir die Franzosen letztens aufgefallen, die dann am Fluchen sind und am Leute schimpfen nach dem Motto 'mich versteht eh keiner, versteht eh keiner meine Sprache, dann kann ich mich auch benehmen wie Sau' bei solchen Leuten denk ich mir das auch. Weil ich das einfach unmöglich finde, wenn man sich sagt ,ich kanns mir leisten'.“

their social contacts and expect them to work it out on their own. This reply from a game master to an angry posting on the official *World of Warcraft* forum about being unfairly kicked exemplifies this approach:

I'm sorry for the frustration, but we do not micromanage player interactions. These systems are in place to allow players to manage their own. For regular pick up groups that group leader has full control over the group and may remove other group members for any reason they wish at any time. We generally recommend that you group with friends and guildmates, those you have reason to trust will not remove you from the group. Alternatively, starting your own group gives you control over who is invited/removed. (World of Warcraft Forum, 2018)

Blizzard's recommendation to group up with friends or guildmates to avoid unpleasant interactions like being kicked is also commonly heard from players. Users that complain about toxic behaviour are often told to find a nice guild, in fact “finding a nice guild” is often treated as the universal solution to all the social problems of the game, but this topic will be examined in more detail later. The following section will deliver some examples of how players felt about vote kicking.

As already mentioned, some felt it was their good right to remove players that were not up to their standard and who did not take advice on how to be better. Being forced to deal with bad players made them feel like they wasted their precious time, so kicking them was their final resort after they did not improve. My guildmates, who all tended to be very dedicated and experienced players, often expressed this opinion. In their view, they were not unfair for removing unfit team members because they first gave them a warning and a chance to do better, like this guild member of mine who complained on *TeamSpeak* about a user playing a healing class character who “pulled”, meaning they provoked an enemy to attack them. It is the job of solely the “tank” to pull enemies because tank type characters can withstand attacks much better than others. Ignoring this rule can in the worst-case lead to the failure of the entire group, especially if the healer gets killed and cannot heal the others anymore. Users who participate in dungeons and raids are expected to know about and adhere to this rule, as my guildmate's anger about this situation shows:

I recently had this healer who pulled one. After I told him to stop that he said: ‘sorry, my bad’ and then he goes on and pulls another 2! And then he cursed at me after I kicked

him! ‘Ah, you piece of crap, why do you kick me?’ After an action like this! (December 8, 2016, translated from German³¹)

My guildmate felt that his anger was justified in this situation because implicit game rules were violated and even after making them explicit, the other person did not obey them. Others often stated similar justifications, like this commenter on a *Facebook* discussion about the pros and cons of vote kicking:

It's a good tool to have, but only if it's used for the right reasons, such as, someone not doing their job, staying AFK [AN: away from keyboard] or getting DC'd. [AN: disconnected] (*Facebook* post, February 21, 2017)

It seems that the majority of users agreed that kicking someone who was not doing their job correctly was perfectly fine, but problems arose when not everyone agreed on how exactly to do said job. For some it was enough if team members did not actively inconvenience them and tried their best, others had higher requirements and expected party members to keep up with them and, a popular phrase, to “pull their own weight”. Therefore, players often felt unfairly treated when they got kicked because in their eyes, they had done nothing wrong. Now if we include the fact that people tend to have blind spots when it comes to their own behaviour and often see their actions differently from how others perceive them, it is easy to understand how vote kicking often was a reason for conflict and distress. Frequently, players tried to make sense of their experience by asking on *Facebook* whether kicking them was justified by recalling the situation and stating their item level and “DPS” (damage per second). Sometimes this solved things and players realised they had misjudged their performance, but often enough this was not the case. Several people reported how being removed from a group caused them emotional distress and greatly upset them, like this interviewee, who even said that they felt physically upset after being kicked from a raid by their guild:

I was kicked from mythic zekvos, by my guild for wiping the raid despite being in the top 3 for dps and making no prior mistakes, i had about 8-10 people telling me i should be ashamed of my self before being removed. Its the first time in about 15 years i was upset about anything, im 28 with kids why a game can make you physically upset is very strange and interesting to me. (November 6, 2018)

³¹ “Da hatte ich letztens so einen Heiler, der hat einen gepullt. Nachdem ich ihm gesagt hab, er soll das lassen, sagt er: ‘sorry, my bad‘ und läuft dann hin und pullt noch 2 weitere! Und dann hat er mich beschimpft nachdem ich ihn gekickt hab! ‘Ah, du Stück scheiße, warum kickst du mich?’ Nach der Aktion!”

5.2.4. Reactions to the Triad of Toxicity - a case study

The community of *World of Warcraft* players understood that a certain level of verbal abuse, exclusion and expulsion was normalised within the game, but while a handful of players embraced this behaviour and many accepted it as part of the typical experience connected with online gaming, a few people expressed sadness about its existence and some rejected its normalisation and called for change. The responses to a post made to a *World of Warcraft Facebook* group on the seventh of March 2017 exemplify the spectrum of users' reactions to verbal abuse, exclusion and expulsion. In the initial post, a player that we will call Hannah recounts her experience with trying to find a group for a heroic level dungeon:

Why do people have to be so damn toxic? I'm a DPS DH on Argent Dawn and I've never done a Heroic before - my gear isn't exactly the best. I think my item level is 820.

Anyway, I put myself in the queue for my first Heroic and about 10-15minutes later I get put into Neltharion's Lair. Straight away, I say that I've never done a Heroic before, and 'Are there any tips that I should know?'

This asshole sends a load of abuse my way, telling me that I should die or go back to playing children's games (I'm actually 22 years old) and then they vote to kick me! What the hell?! Everyone has to start somewhere... Even they were new once. It's really fricking pissed me off!!! Sorry for the rant!

Once she got assigned a group, she explained that she had no experience with the difficulty level and wanted to let her randomly assembled group know so she could get some advice before they started, but instead of advice, she received a lot of angry comments and the group vote kicked her out. This seemed to have upset Hannah enough that she wanted to talk about it on *Facebook*. The thread, unsurprisingly, generated a lot of attention with very mixed responses.

In other posts, similar complaints about toxic behaviour were often answered by suggestions to “just deal with it”. The same was true for this one. A popular advice was to accept that all online gaming was rife with negative people and that actions like that were to be expected. As one player eloquently formulated it:

I just assume every single random person is an asshole until they say something to prove otherwise (*Facebook* post, March 7, 2017)

Several people spun the advice to expect everyone to be potentially abusive a bit further and suggested that the only way to avoid negative attention was to remain unnoticed.

What I've realised in random groups is that you have to stay quiet and unnoticed, otherwise you trigger all the asshats (*Facebook post*, March 7, 2017)

Don't ever say you haven't done it before. Just stay quiet and the morons won't get triggered (: (*Facebook post*, March 7, 2017)

Hannah, having notified her dungeon party of her inexperience, broke that rule and drew their attention. Promptly, she was confronted with insults and kicked from the group.

Closely related to the advice to stay quiet was also the very common recommendation to ignore offending behaviour and not letting yourself be bothered by it. The most widespread argument for ignoring was the suggestion that getting upset was not worth it, often expressed by short, almost dismissive comments like this one:

Lul, Don't bother, Ignore and keep going (*Facebook post*, March 7, 2017)

Other users also advised to just ignore such behaviour, but also offered explanations for why someone would behave in an offending way and tried to diminish its importance by either making it into “kids play” or by insinuating that jealousy might have been at play.

The funniest part about this is that he was either literally a child (13-14 y/o) or a manbaby. Don't take it at heart, people are weird and frustrated. (*Facebook post*, March 7, 2017)

Advising people to ignore behaviour that they considered to be toxic was not only a popular suggestion in Hannah's case, but also in general. Ignoring annoying people was by far the most suggested line of action, followed by avoiding becoming the target in the first place by staying unnoticed and very few people argued for reporting players to *Blizzard*. Despite *Blizzard* having community guidelines in place that allow players to report others for violating them, it seems that this function is not used as often as it could be. *Blizzard's* explicit policy to stay out of user arguments if they do not violate community guidelines might discourage someone who wonders whether to ask game masters for help. However, there were also voices that demanded *Blizzard* to become more active in moderating user interactions, like this player:

Blizzard really need to start putting their foot down and start punishing the overly vile side of the community (*Facebook comment*, March 7, 2017)

Despite the widespread reluctance to report people and ask for help, not everyone agreed that ignoring is the best tactic. Some argued that while rude people were not worth getting upset over, simply accepting abusive behaviour as part and parcel of online games was not the right way either:

Indeed, report and move on. Do not ignore and do not accept it!!! (*Facebook post, March 7, 2017*)

Hannah also received a lot of offers for help, just like many other people did who posted about similar experiences. People stated their player class, item level, server and faction and would let her know how and when they could help her. One person admitted that he was not a good or very experienced player either, but that he would still try to help Hannah run dungeons or raids. His comment suggested that having fun was central to his attitude towards *World of Warcraft*:

I really hate this, i can admit im not great at dps but I have fun and normally its no big issue but sadly people do tend to be dicks about it, if you ever need anyone to run a dungeon or raid with feel free to give me a shout and we can suck together haha (*Facebook post, March 7, 2017*)

Her fellow players also offered sympathy and recalled their own negative experiences. This showed that people dealt differently with experiencing toxic situations - some did not let it affect them and easily ignored it, but others had a hard time dealing with it and occasionally even quit playing altogether. Some reactions included getting severe anxiety over grouping up with random people, their performance decreasing after a negative experience or completely quitting dungeons and raids or even *World of Warcraft*, like the following comments illustrate:

I don't do dungeons or raids because of this, had a few bad experiences when I started out (*Facebook post, March 7, 2017*)

This is the reason I stopped playing wow :) know how you feel.. seems like some people can't accept that not everyone is the grandmaster of everything.. and god forbid if you play to have fun instead of trying to be the best all the time! (*Facebook post, March 7, 2017*)

Its simple. I left wow for this. It's pointless to try to fix this. It's funny though, most people when a new expansion comes, are all very nice. After a while they start to whining for everything and be toxic for everyone. It's pointless to try to manage this. Wow is mmorg so having a guild for support is not enough. You have to come to a

finder many times and then you realize that the games becomes a swamp of bad toxic players. Therefore you quit and play something else. (*Facebook* post, March 7, 2017)

All in all, the majority of reactions and comments to Hannah's story were positive and supportive. People gave recommendations for future behaviour, offered help, encouragement and told stories of their own grievances. Some expressed sympathy for Hannah and voiced sadness for how she was treated.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to say for sure that Hannah only received positive comments because the *Facebook* group is managed by a team of volunteer moderators who take care to remove insults. One of the moderators in the end stated that she would deactivate the comment function for Hannah's post as there were too many offending remarks being added. Sadly, it is impossible to retrieve the deleted comments and they therefore cannot be included in the analysis here. However, the other *Facebook* group that I observed followed a different set of guidelines. Negative or even offending comments were not deleted as thoroughly and the moderators sometimes even left insults themselves. For example, a post from December 2016 that complained in a, admittedly, rather passive-aggressive way about new players not getting a chance to participate, was answered by some very aggressive comments that would have been deleted by the first *Facebook* group. The initial post read:

Thank you dear wow community for not giving newbies a chance (*Facebook* post, December 26, 2016, translated from German³²)

This complaint seemed to have hit a nerve with some users and the original poster was insulted and told to quit. One of the moderators said so herself:

Then just go play Sims or Barbie.. I don't know (*Facebook* post, December 26, 2016, translated from German³³)

Suggestions to play *Sims* and *Barbie* are used to insinuate that the person complaining was lacking the skills needed for more demanding and complicated games like *World of Warcraft*. This was a common insult that aimed to set the virtual world apart from other games that were deemed as inferior. Another user argued in a similar way, but added some more insults to the mix:

You're welcome, it was my pleasure. You're just shitty and the experienced players recognised that and excluded you from the start. That's how it is. Now go play your

³² „danke liebe wow-gemeinschaft das ihr neulingen keine chance gebt“

³³ „Dann gehe halt Sims spielen oder Barbie.. Ka..“

browser game and fuck off (*Facebook* post, December 26, 2016, translated from German³⁴)

Those examples show that the tone could indeed be quite rough in *World of Warcraft* related forums and *Facebook* groups, as well as in the game and that it is possible that Hannah received similar responses before the moderators intervened.

5.2.5. Expectations

Besides verbal abuse, exclusion and expulsion there exists another aspect connected with dungeons and raids that puts a lot pressure on some players - being expected to “do your homework”. *World of Warcraft* is a game with a long history and countless dedicated users who, over more than a decade, tried to find the optimal way to do things. Often, this results in, quite literally, hundreds of guides and websites on topics like how to quickly and effectively level your character from level one to 110, where to find rare mounts, how to play a particular class, or how to solve a puzzle. Particularly popular are guides for classes, dungeons and raids and they can go into great detail. For instance, the class guide for “demon hunter”, the class that I played during fieldwork, on *icy-veins.com*, one of the most popular *World of Warcraft* centered websites, is over 26,000 words long and covers everything, from where to stand in a boss fight, over what kind of gear to get to which attacks to use against a certain enemy (Wordup, 2020). The guides for raids explain every single opponent in excruciating detail, complete with statistical data and tactics for a successful encounter. Many hours of experience, research and theorycrafting go into the development of those guides and they are invaluable resources for players. However, the existence of such exhaustive guides also often means that players are expected to know a lot of things before they even start playing with others. While it is not necessary to know exact numbers about how choosing a certain attack over another might increase your character’s damage, it is assumed that players know which of the two attacks is preferable. Especially when it comes to dungeons and raids, knowing what to expect and how to behave before even entering the instance for the first time has become a standard requirement. On one hand, this certainly makes completing raids and dungeons easier and fail safer, but on the other hand, it takes away the experience of finding out how to beat the enemies by yourself. While most players seem to not take issue with this situation, some really dislike having to

³⁴ “bitte schön, war mir eine freude. bist eben scheiße und die erfahrenen spieler haben das erkannt und dich gleich ausgeschlossen. so is das eben. jetzt geh dein browsergame spielen und verpiss dich”

study so much tactics beforehand, like those players, who rather wanted to find out for themselves:

Part of the problem with this game is that people want you to know the content before you enter it rather than have the fun of exploring it and learning how to do it. In most other games this would be seen as cheating and spoiling the fun of the game but in Wow it's expected of you. (*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016)

It's a game, not a chore. I really can't be arsed to undertake homework to play a game. Without using any of these websites and guides the only way of knowing is to actually do it. The fun is in finding out for yourself how to do something, not 'cheat' by looking up on a guide! (*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016)

Of course, the players that were in favour of preparing for raids and dungeons by reading tutorials and knowing what to expect before entering the raid zone had valid points as well. After someone complained that new players did not receive help from experienced ones, this user pointed out that there was more than enough material online if someone wanted to learn and that he did not see why he and others who knew their stuff should be stuck with someone who was unprepared:

I do help others. I help newbies all the time. I'm not gonna help them learn their class in a dungeon. I'm not gonna help them with tactics on a 6 month old raid. These are basic things you are allowed to expect from every player that join another group and wants to get stuff done. If they need to 'do to learn' they can quest. If they needs someone to tell them how to play, there are thousands and thousands of guide on everything in this game. Wowhead has everything you need and more. When you join other players who are all prepared, know their stuff and are ready to go, nobody wants to sit there and wait while I explain the most basic stuff. And guess what, ON RELEASE DAY, you are still capable of reading the dungeon journal, that's not an excuse. (*Facebook* post, July 22, 2018)

By means of verbal abuse, exclusion, expulsion and expectations *World of Warcraft* players are being pressured into behaving in a way that the dominant inhabitants of the virtual world determine. This chapter showed what kind of social pressure users are exposed to and, by example of a *Facebook* thread of early 2017, how they talked about it online. The next chapter will examine and explain how this social pressure exists in the first place in a video game that is supposed to be a recreational activity.

5.3. Reasons for social pressure and social violence

World of Warcraft is a MMO and therefore in its very nature a social game. While some parts of the virtual world can be experienced without help from others, the more challenging and rewarding aspects of the game require teamwork. On one hand, this encourages players to form meaningful connections with others, but on the other hand, it also submits them to potential interpersonal problems like social pressure.

Those who want to do raids and dungeons are particularly susceptible to it because players cannot get into good groups to do end game content unless they can show credentials, so they must work to achieve those goals. Often, high item levels or prove of previous experience are required. As a new player or as someone who is less talented or has less time to practice, this can be very difficult, because it is much easier, and sometimes necessary, to have a group when you want to improve your item level or complete a dungeon or raid. It is a vicious circle - no experience - no group; no group - no chance at getting experience.

This kind of gatekeeping is better understood when we consider that *World of Warcraft* is a game where time plays an essential role.

5.3.1. Time is status

A lot of the issues and disputes players seem to be attributed to matters of time. It is a lack of time to play, an inability to keep the raid schedule, spending too much time online, not spending enough time practicing, wasting people's time, not giving people enough time.

Unlike many contemporary multiplayer games, *World of Warcraft* has no “pay to win” option. While it is theoretically possible to buy whole accounts with well geared characters or to pay real money to have a professional gamer log into your account and level up your own avatars³⁵, those kinds of practices are strongly forbidden by *Blizzard*.

The only legal way to improve is by spending a lot of time on the game. What distinguishes players from each other is how much effort, aka time and dedication, they put into the game. Skill and talent are another factor, but that too can be helped with time spent practicing. There are claims that you can be a good player even if you have little time or that the amount of years that you have played do not determine how good you are, but they always seem to be a “but...”. Therefore, time is a precious resource and people who spend the most time are often seen as the most dedicated. This shows in various ways, for instance that comparing with others how long everyone has been playing *World of Warcraft* was a popular topic both within the game

³⁵ For more information on gold- and loot farmers, see Dibbell (2017)

and in forum and *Facebook* discussions. Usually, the person who had played the longest “won” the conversation, like in this conversation on the trade chat channel, where a bunch of players showed off their achievements. For context: if a player logs into *World of Warcraft* during the yearly in-game event “Anniversary of WoW” at the end of November, they get a specific achievement for this year that can be shown to others. The fourth anniversary event was the first one that was implemented into the game in 2008, meaning that everyone who has this achievement had an active account in November 2008 and maybe even longer than that.

00:01:59 [Nazogrâlina-Blackrock]: how about something different [WoW's 6th Anniversary] who can go lower? :D

00:02:24 [Mhuirî]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]

00:02:28 [Arudiunsun]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]? ^^

00:02:34 [Yrah-Blackrock]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]

00:02:41 [Circlé-Blackrock]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]

00:02:51 [Nazogrâlina-Blackrock]: anyone before the 4th? :D

00:03:01 [Sapeer]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary] everyone's got that one anyway

00:03:21 [Nazogrâlina-Blackrock]: ah ok :p lot's of old hands here^^ (December 19, 2016, translated from German³⁶)

Similarly, people liked to compare how many hours (or days, weeks or months) they had spent on a single character. If the number was particularly high, this was often communicated in a joking, slightly self-deprecating manner like “lol wasted 5 months of my life for this pixel elf”, but there was also a sense of pride in those statements. It was implicated that a person who spent a lot of time on *World of Warcraft* also cared a lot. In addition, game time is what users pay real money for, so, naturally, spending their game time well and not wasting it on activities that do not benefit their goals was important to the majority of users.

One reason why raiding put so much pressure on players is because raiding takes up a lot of time. It takes time to organise raids, it takes time to prepare all the ability enhancing flasks and foodstuffs, and in addition players often actively have to try and keep a schedule so that

³⁶ “00:01:59 [Nazogrâlina-Blackrock]: how about something different [WoW's 6th Anniversary] wer kann unterbieten? :D

00:02:24 [Mhuirî]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]

00:02:28 [Arudiunsun]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]? ^^

00:02:34 [Yrah-Blackrock]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]

00:02:41 [Circlé-Blackrock]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary]

00:02:51 [Nazogrâlina-Blackrock]: jemand vor dem 4ten? :D

00:03:01 [Sapeer]: [WoW's 4th Anniversary] den hat doch jeder

00:03:21 [Nazogrâlina-Blackrock]: ah ok :p viele alte hasen hier^^“

everyone is online in time for the raid. In raids and dungeons, players are forced to rely on others, which poses a high risk - if the other team members make mistakes, the whole group fails. This risk exists in all raid and dungeon groups, whether they are practiced guild raid teams or random groups, because one bad player can mean the demise of the group. If a group fails at a dungeon or raid, they have to start over from the beginning, thus “waste time”. Especially when it comes to grouping up with strangers, players can be very apprehensive about ending up with an unskilled or badly-behaved person who has them all fail. To avoid this situation, players try to determine in advance whether someone is likely to fail by judging their item level and previous achievements. Often, this ends in setting minimum requirements that are well over what is actually required by the game mechanics to ensure that only the best candidates apply. Players are aware of this practice and many who openly admit to it are unapologetic about it, as the following quotes show:

The reason people look for 890+ for m+ is because it's too easy to acquire 870 which is a perfectly reasonable iLvl to do a 10 [AN: meaning a level ten mythic dungeon], but why would you want to take someone that's going to Slow you down, I'm not elitist, but I also don't have the patience to have people in my groups that have no idea what they're doing and don't even bother to ask (*Facebook post*, January 27, 2017)

I don't really see a problem of wanting higher ilvl for smooth fast runs, they are obviously not doing it for the gear but maybe to just level up their stone quick. They aren't there to boost you thru your dungeons. If you want a group on your terms make your own damn groups... (*Facebook post*, January 20, 2017)

During an interview Dirk, one of my guild members, stated that the fixation on markers like item level and achievements made it difficult for new players to get into groups and to properly learn how to play. When he started to play actively in 2012, groups were also trying to figure out if someone was a good match for them, but the process was a bit more personal.

16:39:08 [Dirk-Thrall] whispers: when I started, I was asked how much dps do you do and do you know the boss. As a tank I was asked if I knew the mechanics and the bosses and as a healer whether I could do the healing for boss xzy

16:40:08 [Dirk -Thrall] whispers: that is abilities and skills were asked for, not gs [AN: gear score, meaning item level]

16:40:44 To [Dirk -Thrall]: what happened if you couldn't do that? Did you still get a chance?

16:41:45 [Dirk -Thrall] whispers: yes, you got 1 chance, if you failed too much they said: sry, that's not enough for us, maybe next time if you got more experience

16:42:39 To [Dirk -Thrall]: What do you think, why did that change?

16:44:05 [Dirk -Thrall] whispers: I think it's because there are less and less old players and more newbies and so the old ones try to make the new ones to buckle down some more, so to say, to take the game seriously (Dirk, May 2, 2017, translated from German³⁷)

While he disapproved of using simple markers like item level as the sole argument for not accepting someone into a group, he said that he understood why people did not want players that might hold them back in their team, even if he personally had a different approach. Dirk, who was a very skilled and dedicated gamer, refused to think too much about who he grouped up with and said he did not set any minimum requirements when he formed his own pick-up groups. In his own words: "it's just a game".

Others clearly had a different opinion. Even if they admitted that it was just a game, they did not feel like it was fair to expect players to look after less experienced or skilled ones.

You don't expect employers to give you a job you aren't qualified to do right? And even tho it is only a game, people invest time and money in it and would rather not have their time wasted. (*Facebook* post, January 27, 2017)

This sentiment naturally did not always sit well with players on the other side of the spectrum. Often, they felt left behind and some even developed feelings of anxiety over the high expectations they were faced with. This player stated she did not feel able to do dungeons and raids with strangers anymore because she knew she was too slow and would get verbally abused for it:

³⁷ "16:39:08 [Dirk-Thrall] flüstert: wo ich anfangen habe wurde ich gefragt als dd wieviel dps machst du und kennst du die bosse als tank wurde ich gefragt kennst du die mechanik und den boss und als heiler schaffst du es den boss xzy zu heilen

16:40:08 [Dirk-Thrall] flüstert: sprich es wurde mehr nach skill und geschick gefragt als nach gs

16:40:44 Zu [Dirk -Thrall]: was war, wenn man das nicht so drauf hatte? Hat man dann trotzdem mal ne Chance bekommen?

16:41:45 [Dirk-Thrall] flüstert: ja 1 chance hat man bekommen hat man zu viel gefailt wurde gesagt: srry leider reciht uns das nicht aber vllt nächstes mal wenn mehr exp hast

16:42:39 Zu [Dirk -Thrall]: was glaubst du, warum hat sich das verändert?

16:44:05 [Dirk -Thrall] flüstert: ich glaube liegt daran das sich immer weniger alte spieler gibt und mehr neulinge und somit wollen die alten die neuen trimmen das sie sich mal mehr ins zeug legen, sprich das spiel zu ernst nehmen"

Being an older player, and disabled too, I no longer feel able to do pug runs, be they dungeon or raid, as I know all I would get would be insults and nastiness for being too slow, or not good enough, or..... (Facebook post, December 3, 2016)

Another user did not feel insecure about her own skills, yet still deeply disliked doing dungeons and raids with random people because she could not stand how people treated each other:

This is why I hate all the quests that require dungeons. I like to complete quest chains, but I hate bumping into this kind of attitudes. Every time I click that LFG-button I get anxiety. Over NORMAL dungeons. I'm happy to hear I'm not alone. People think you get anxiety because you can't play but that's not it. It's getting anxiety because of the hostility. I don't have to be the target of the hostility. I feel it for others too. And I play lots of battlegrounds so I'm used to trash talk but nothing is more toxic than some overgeared mythic raider doing casual content way below their ilvl and kicking people for doing bad dps and yelling at them to learn to play their class. (Facebook post, July 22, 2018)

Nardi made similar observations during her research. While she was doing fieldwork, a new expansion pack was released. Soon, this led to tensions in her guild, because the better, more skilled players progressed fast and left the other members behind:

The guild could have slowly accommodated the less geared or skilled members. But such a solution would have abrogated the logic of the game, which was to perform to one's fullest ability. WoW was a voluntary space of performative play, not a place in which players wanted to spend hours helping the less fortunate. (Nardi, 2010: 65)

Although the guild members had friendly relationships, the more talented players did not want to waste time by helping the less talented. If they had done so, it would have qualified as “carrying”, a special situation where better equipped and more skilled group members take over the responsibilities of lesser equipped and experienced members. The inferior group member(s) can gain a lot from a situation like this since they get the same amount of “experience points” and, often, the same chance for loot as the team members carrying them. Without their help, the player(s) might not be able to complete game content on this level or might have to spend a lot more time on it. In contrast, the group members carrying the other person(s) do not usually gain any special benefits from this situation. From the point of view of the person being carried this practise is also often called “boosting”, as the person's character receives a quick and easy boost.

5.3.2. Wasting time

Many players see carrying as a situation in which someone holds them back or in which someone deliberately attaches themselves to advanced players to profit from them. This gets them angry because they feel hindered in their progress and as if they are being taken advantage of.

If you decide to play with other people, you shouldn't expect them to carry you. You need to perform just as well as everyone else. And if for some reason you can't do that, keep questing to learn your class. (*Facebook post*, July 22, 2018)

People will be annoyed if you're underperforming and, to some extent, they have a right to be. Yes some players are just downright abusive but on the other hand somebody being completely useless and expecting to be completely carried through content is just as unreasonable as being completely abusive. There are MANY resources out there that can take you from a 1/10 to a 5/10 with a couple hours of reading or watching. (*Facebook post*, December 3, 2016)

The players in Nardi's guild apparently felt the same about carrying others:

Players advancing quickly wanted to play with others doing the same. They expressed irritation at slower or less skilled or geared players. The advanced players did not consider it their obligation to help the slower players, who were described in Scarlet Raven [AN: Nardi's guild at the time] website posts as 'less dedicated'. (Nardi, 2010: 64)

However, some users are fine with carrying others as long as they willingly get themselves into the situation or as long as they are being paid for it. Often, carrying others for free happens with guild members or friends, like in my own case, when my guild colleagues offered to take me along to dungeons that were well above my skill level. Their reasoning behind this charitable act was that their characters were so well equipped that they did not even need a fifth person to complete the dungeon, so it did not really matter that I could not be of help. As long as I was not actively holding them back, I could tag along and benefit from their advanced item level and skill. I assume that improving my own skills and avatar in the process and becoming a useful addition to the guild was an added advantage, although it was not openly talked about.

This case at least has been made by several people who argued for the community to be more helpful to new players. They argued that helping bad players pays off in the long run because they get better and eventually become competent partners.

Total agree if you don't help the next generation of raiders onto the ladder then at some point the raiding environment will slowly die. My son is 8 now and every year he plays more and more wow with help in right direction he could be the next Sco without help most likely quit because wow is easy game to play hard game to master :) (*Facebook* post, April 25, 2017)

As mentioned before, paying for boosts, otherwise known as paying a guild or a group of people to take you along and carry you through advanced game content, is a widespread, although not always fully accepted, custom. Apparently, it was already in practice when Nardi did her first research of *World of Warcraft* before 2007. The terms might have changed over the years, but the sentiments she describes have stayed the same:

Player attitudes toward powerleveling vary. Some find it silly because why rush through the levels not really playing at all? Some believe it is ineffectual because lower level players do not learn to play on their own. Some take pride in accomplishing things on their own. Some find it acceptable practice because their goal is to arrive as quickly as possible at “endgame” activities available only to level 60 characters. Some guilds adopt powerleveling as a service they provide while others feel it is not in players’ best interests. (Nardi et al., 2007: 6-7)

The burgeoning demand to prove that one has experience with the game content ahead before being accepted into a raid or dungeon party guilds has opened a new field of business. Well-equipped and skilled raid groups, often guilds, sell a few spots to players without any experience so that they can gain the achievement that shows other users they have managed to complete a certain raid. The classic type of boosting, or powerleveling, as it used to be called during Nardi’s fieldwork, is still going on as well. Some groups also offer “loot runs” which promise to hand over all the loot from the raid to the paying customer(s). Usually, those offers are advertised in-game on the trade chat channel or in *Facebook* groups and are paid for with the in-game currency that users earn by collecting and selling items in the game. The target group of those offers, often new, inexperienced players without a group of friends to help them for free, have mixed feelings about the so-called “pay runs”. On one hand, it is often the only way for them to gain the necessary experience and equipment, but on the other hand, they feel that in a social

game like *World of Warcraft* getting into a group should not require them to pay for it. Admitting that you have paid for a run like that seems to be a bit shameful. Even if it might not always be completely socially accepted, selling loot runs and boosts is perfectly in line with the official game rules. As long as they only use only in-game currency for those business transactions, *Blizzard* allows all kinds of sales amongst players that do not require the exchange of account information like passwords.

5.3.3. Hardcore versus Casual

Another aspect of player interaction that emphasises the importance of time in *World of Warcraft* is the way in which users talk about different types of players. The most used terms are “hardcore” (often used synonymously with “progress”) and “casual” and signify, in player lingo, two opposite player types. The casual player is said to care less, take the game less seriously, they spend less time and put in less effort. On the opposite side, the hardcore player wants to maximise and optimise what they are doing, they care deeply about the game, spend a lot of time on it, have goals and work hard for them. The player community seems to look down upon casuals, although there are voices who demand that casuals should not be held in lower esteem than hardcore players. Hardcore players are admired, envied and valued, but are also sometimes seen as the source of asocial behaviour and elitism. Casual and hardcore are usually presented as opposites, as if they can never overlap.

There are two ways to define hardcore players - first through looking at the difficulty level of the content a player can clear and second by the amount of time they spend on any part of the game. Therefore, someone might think of themselves as a casual because they only hunt for pets, but others might see the same person as hardcore because they spend a lot of time online. Or someone can see themselves as hardcore because they raid on the highest difficulty level, but someone else can think they are casual because they only play for five hours a week. The two previous chapters of this thesis dealt with the importance of time as a central and precious resource for *World of Warcraft* players and established that the time spent in the virtual world is a status symbol. Therefore, it might seem like a contradiction that one of the two ways to define hardcore players is less about how much time they spend online and more about what kind of things they do while in-game. However, I also established that wasting time is seen as an offense. The distinction lies in what kind of behaviour is considered wasteful. The majority of the player community seems to think that there are good and bad ways to spend your time and the good ways are almost always connected to improving your avatar or your skills. Not

everyone agrees, of course, but this just shows that, like any community, *World of Warcraft* players are not a homogenous mass and sometimes hold opposing beliefs.

It seems that the most widely accepted definition of hardcore is the first one - seeing hardcore players as capable, experienced, dedicated users of the virtual world, while being a casual or, seemingly worse, a “social” player is often talked of in a negative tone. Even people advocating for the fair treatment of every single person use sentences like “even if they are casuals...”, showing that they are aware of the low status of casual players. If you are a casual, you are said to care less, spend less time online, and you are less invested in the game. A player is seemingly more worthy on the eyes of other users if they are very invested in the game and are serious about *World of Warcraft*. Of course, players who are serious about the virtual world are also expected to become capable, skilled inhabitants of *Azeroth*. Even if the “time is status” argument is not directly a central part of this way to define hardcore, becoming a skilful player usually does take a considerable amount of time, unless the person in question is very talented or has a lot of previous experience in similar computer games.

This explains why “caring” about *World of Warcraft* is often equated with “spending time”, even if some people argue that you can “care” and be dedicated even if you do not spend a lot of time in-game. Maybe what they are referring to here is that you can either spend one hour in-game chatting to guild members and fishing, or you can spend one hour in-game running dungeons. The former is seen as “not being dedicated”, the latter is. The following discussion between two commenters on a *Facebook* post that lamented getting verbal abuse in a dungeon and asked how long-time casual players were supposed to learn if they always encountered negative behaviour is exemplary to this view:

A: No one 'deserves' anything based solely on participation. Learn your rotation. Learn the mechanics of the game. Someone who after 12 years hasn't bothered to learn the game is hopeless, and I don't want him in my group. I 'deserve' to not have to carry people, too.

B: It won't but to get kicked from a heroic dungeon is ridiculous. It's not even top content. It's just people being arseholes. Being a casual doesn't mean you don't have any right to progress.

A: But... it does. Progress requires dedication, and someone who spent 12 years in the game sightseeing is not progressing. I don't want to carry them. (*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016)

Commenter “A” seems to have taken offense on the idea that someone could play *World of Warcraft* for twelve years without learning how to do dungeons, dismissively calling everything they did “sightseeing” without knowing how exactly the original poster chose to spend their game time. It suggests that only doing dungeons and raids counts as seriously playing the game in A’s eyes.

In his work on trolling, Marshall (2020) explores how behaviour is framed differently depending on how the group encouraging or enacting this behaviour is perceived. For players in *World of Warcraft* who exclude others whose skills they view as inferior, this means that this act can be seen as justified if the excluding players are ascribed with many positively viewed traits. In this case, since the *World of Warcraft* community often attributes hard work, determination and skilfulness to hardcore players, their acts of gatekeeping are excused more readily. Of course, not every single player values the same traits and sees hardcore players in the same light. Those players are often the ones criticising the exclusion practises and calling out toxic behaviour.

The observations Nardi made during her research more than ten years ago resemble the discrepancy between hardcore and casual players that I noticed during my fieldwork. Nardi recounts how slower players were also described as “less dedicated” in posts on her guild’s website. It is interesting to note that advancing in raids and dungeons and improving a character’s item level are being held in higher esteem than socializing and exploring - one who does the first is serious about the game, one who focuses on other aspects is just playing around³⁸. It seems that a certain type of player is valued over the others. One person who knows much about player types is Richard Bartle.

Bartle was one of the developers of one of the very first virtual worlds (*MUD1*) and today is a professor of game design. Through his experience with users of virtual worlds he developed a categorization of player types that has been widely accepted by researchers of virtual worlds and online games. He names four types of players who inhabit virtual worlds and MMOs:

Achievers. These people put the game-like aspect of the virtual world to the fore. They like doing things that achieve defined goals, thereby progressing their character through the world’s built-in ranking system.

³⁸ Raids and dungeons are not the only activities that are held in high regard - doing PvP in arenas or on battlegrounds is as well. But since this research is not focusing on PvP activities, they are intentionally left out of the discussion here.

Socializers. People for whom the greatest reward is interacting with other people, through the medium of the virtual world. Some do it as themselves, others roleplay behind a mask.

Explorers. The ultimate delight for Explorers is increasing their knowledge about the way the virtual world works. Their joy is in discovery. They seek out the new.

Killers. People who want to dominate others. The classic way is through attacking them or otherwise making their life difficult for them, but it can also manifest in less overt fashion, such as politicking, rumor-mongering, pedanticism, or guilt-trip maternalism ('No, it's okay, you go and enjoy yourself. I'll just sit here by myself, waiting for someone to come along, I'll think of something to do...'). (Bartle, 2004: 130)

It is easy to determine that the players who delight in raiding and running dungeons can likely be attributed to the achiever player type and that the so-called casual players are often of the socializer-type³⁹, even if, as Bartle himself admits, most people are a mix of types with a preference into a certain direction. *World of Warcraft* is a MMO that has content available to please each of the four types - socializers and hang out and chat with their fellow players, explorers have a vast virtual geography and countless hidden jokes and objects to figure out, killers can either get into PvP or spend their time aggravating others and achievers have raids, dungeons and collections to obsess over. According to Bartle, game developers should strive to maintain a balance in the makeup of their player base because the different types influence each other and imbalance can, in the worst case, lead to the critical loss of players. The relation between socializers and killers is especially strong - more killers mean significantly less socializers, while more socializers also increase the numbers of killers. One of only three stable configurations, as per Bartle (2004: 135), is "a balance between all four types, with enough explorers to control the killers". From my understanding, this is what *Blizzard* attempted to accomplish with *World of Warcraft*. However, virtual worlds are constantly changing, especially when new game content is being added and *World of Warcraft* has become increasingly achiever friendly. This is reflected by the increasing numbers and prominence of achiever type players as well as the stronger emphasis on rankings and number-crunching that *Blizzard* supports. If the virtual world starts to become imbalanced, Bartle suggests that there

³⁹ Since in this context "socializers" is an original term coined by Bartle, I decided to keep using the American spelling for this term throughout the thesis.

are several incentives that the developers can set to counteract this. His example reads as if it was written for *World of Warcraft*:

If the number of socializers is dropping to the extent that the world is becoming ‘too’ achiever-oriented, a simple solution might be to advertise the virtual world in a manner that would be more likely to attract socializers than achievers. Changes to the virtual world’s design can also help, for example by heavily increasing the challenge to achievers (so as to persuade them to go around in groups, which socializers like) or by adding socializer goodies. (Bartle, 2004: 136)

It seems that this is what *Blizzard* attempted to do when they made several obligatory quest chains end in raids and dungeons - they tried to force socializers into achiever zones. Before, users always could avoid raids and dungeons and, while they might not get good equipment and achievements, they could enjoy the game on their own terms. Since the release of the “Legion” expansion pack, many central quest chains suddenly end in raids and dungeons, forcing all players take part in those. Maybe it started even earlier, with the introduction of the looking for raid function that ended the need for time-intensive group assembly through the chat channels. This new tool aided the achievers who could get ahead faster with the new system, but it robbed the socializers of the interactions of group finding. A study published in 2006 on the social life of guilds found that social interactions and general behaviour in *World of Warcraft* was greatly influenced by the game mechanics of the virtual world (Williams et al., 2006). Some kinds of interactions were encouraged while others were discouraged, sometimes according to the intentions of the game developers, but often also without their explicit plans, like a side effect of other design choices.

Blizzard should have a great interest in keeping socializers involved because this player type tends to be the most loyal one (Bartle, 2004: 144). However, if they continually get attacked by killer-types, belittled and excluded by achievers and misunderstood by the game developers, their numbers might dwindle.

5.4. The raid as a ritual

After exploring the role of the raid in great detail, this is finally the chapter to tie together ritual studies and virtual worlds. Performance studies, which are closely connected to ritual studies not only because of Richard Schechner’s close academic friendship with Victor Turner, recognises the familiarity of play, games, sports, theatre and ritual (Schechner, 2003). It can be argued that the raid is the perfect example for the connection between play, game, sports, theatre

and ritual - it is happening within a game with people playing, it has certain attributes of team sports, the users are fulfilling roles and acting out a story and they do so in a special, almost sacred space that has immense meaning to the community of *World of Warcraft* users. It is undoubtedly unnecessary to analyse how a MMORPG is a game or a play, the connection is right in the name, but the other three - sports, theatre and ritual - are interesting to write about. This chapter will examine in which aspects raids could fall into the category of theatre and sports and will end by arguing why ritual is the category that fits best.

5.4.1. The raid as theatre or performance

In social anthropological works video games and internet culture have often been studied with concepts taken from performance ethnography and performance studies. Culture is seen as a large stage, with people playing roles and enacting meaning. Of course, those interpretations are heavily influenced by the European tradition of theatre. Celia Pearce states that the approach of seeing online culture as a performance works especially well if we take performance researcher Norman Denzin's statement "We inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture. The dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance" (Denzin 2003: 81) into consideration and equate it to the role of the researcher in a virtual world. The researcher cannot enter and see the virtual world without becoming a part of it and taking on a role him- or herself, so the researcher, who is part of the audience, has to become a performer him- or herself in order to see the performance. Pearce further claims that the internet has become humanity's largest stage. Platforms like *YouTube*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* all let their users become performers and audience at the same time. Virtual worlds and especially MMORPGs can be seen as the "most dramatic instantiation of the digital stage" (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009: 58). The need to be both part of the audience and a performer at the same time to truly experience and understand what is happening of course immediately reminds one of the basic principles underlying participant observation, making it the perfect method for researching online culture.

Although virtual worlds themselves are already like a virtual theatre stage, the raid is even more dramatised. During a raid, the group experiences and acts out a story. The opponents that players face in raids all have backstories, often hold little speeches before the fights and, in short, tell a story. Often, raids play an important role in the wider lore of *World of Warcraft* and act as the stages on which dramatic changes in the story of the virtual world take place. According to Schechner (Galbo, 2014), performances tell narratives, they are behaviour that is not happening for the first time, but for the second to never-ending time. With raids, where it is

normal for players to participate in the same raid several dozen times, this description of performance resonates especially well. But the performativity is not the only reason why raids are closely related to theatrical drama, another important aspect is that every player has a role to play. Those roles are clearly defined and often have exact scripts attached that tell the players how to act in which situation. Only when each role is performed correctly the story of the raid can be played out. Despite the backstories of the various enemies and the embedment of the raid into the greater lore of *World of Warcraft*, the core story of raids is always more or less the same - beat the bad guy. Players know that this will be the outcome of a successfully played out raid, but what is not known is how to play their roles - players have to find out themselves where to stand, how to act and where to go. When the players deviate too far from their roles, the story collapses and they have to start over again. *World of Warcraft* players, too, talk about performance. Within the game, “to perform well” means that a player has the appropriate skills, knows how to use them and is able to stick to the script of the raid or dungeon, while “underperforming” has the opposite connotations. People who raid usually aim to improve their performance. On *Facebook*, when a player complained about unfair treatment, others often asked about their performance, suggesting that the abuse they had experienced was due to their failure to perform accordingly:

Im not sure if [...] you were just underperforming for a HC [AN: heroic dungeon]. If you are underperforming for a HC you are doing pretty badly. If you were underperforming then I suggest reading all boss tactics and looking up videos.
(*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016)

The question of the difference between a ritual and a theatrical performance in the European tradition is as old as ritual studies themselves. According to Walsdorf (2013), there are two main distinctions. First, a ritual is enacted “live” in front of the audience and consists of a repetition of known sequences of action, while a theatrical performance is rehearsed hidden from the audience’s eyes and is only performed later when the performance is perfected. In a ritual, the audience is to a certain extent part of the performative process, while the audience is excluded from the theatre’s most important performative process - the rehearsal. However, once a theatre troupe has learned their new play and enacts it on stage, there are usually no more rehearsals. Additionally, each enactment of the play can be slightly different from the other ones, something that is often expected and appreciated by the audience. Walsdorf goes on to explain that the second main difference is concerned with the authorship of theatrical versus ritual performance. In the theatre, actors and authors usually want their names to be connected

to the success of the performance, while in rituals, the single participant is less important than the role that he or she fulfils. While the first distinction is certainly true for raids, which are in themselves both the performance and the rehearsal, the second is not so easy. Even though the participants in the raid can only succeed as a group and know of their dependency of the team, the individual players still compare their achievements to those of other group members and want to be recognised for their accomplishments.

But in general, the aspect of the audience is a complicated issue. Contemporary theatre for instance often aims to break down the barrier between audience and performers, making the audience part of the play. Does this mean that this is not theatre anymore, because there is no clearly defined audience? Also, how many people does an audience need for it to be called an audience? Grimes, in his discussion of the term performance, explains that both Schechner and Goffman imply that the existence of an audience is necessary: “[...] the mark of performance is action in front of others, a showing before an audience” (2013: 228). However, since humans internalise the expectations of others, this also means that an actual audience does not have to be present for an action to be defined as a performance. This is a very helpful point if theatre is to be understood in a broader sense than just in the European tradition and it also helps understand the raid as a performance.

In conclusion, analysing the raid as a theatre-like performance holds up to a certain extent, but unfortunately it does not offer an explanation for the social pressure users are experiencing in connection with raiding.

5.4.2. The raid as a ritualised sports event

Ever since Geertz published his famous study of the Balinese cock fight, sports events have been increasingly analysed as rituals in social anthropology. The general idea behind analysing sports events as rituals is that the event works as a way to convey tensions and power relations in society that cannot be otherwise expressed or shown. Through the ritualistic performance of, for instance, the cock fight or a soccer match, the audience as well as the participants express deep rifts in their society (Krieger & Belliger, 2013).

According to Schechner, sport events are related to rituals because of four basic qualities that they share with games and theatre:

- 1) a special ordering of time;
- 2) a special value attached to objects;
- 3) non-productivity in terms of goods;
- 4) rules.

Often special places - non-ordinary places - are set aside or constructed to perform these activities in. (Schechner, 2003: 8)

While one can argue about whether or not the raid is a non-productive enterprise for its participants who expect some pay-off in the form of loot, experience and recognition, everything else applies perfectly.

Certain forms of raiding obviously fall into the category of sports events - not surprisingly, since computer games and sports have been linked for at least a decade. All over the world, there are highly remunerated championships in various categories, most often they are competitive multiplayer games, but also single player games where people compete against other people's rankings can be popular "e-sports" games. For *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard is hosting annual championships in PvP arena fights, where players directly fight each other, and mythic dungeon competitions, where teams of players run against each other in a PvE setting. The team members, the prizes, the locations and the audiences resemble the champions league events of any large and popular sport. There are no official raid championships, maybe because they are much more time intensive than arena fights and dungeons and broadcasts therefore would be too long to capture the audience's attention until the very last team has finished, maybe because competitive raiding is mostly about securing a "world first" - being the first raid group to defeat a new boss in a new raid. However, there are rankings on popular websites like wowprogress.com, warcraftlogs.com and raider.io that list which guild's raid team did best at certain raids. Those rankings state progress, speed and execution grades and are accessible for anyone interested. The top guilds, those that managed to get a world first, are celebrities in *World of Warcraft's* social sphere and everyone interested in raiding knows their names. *Method*, in their own words the "most achieved raid guild of all time" (Method, n.d.) leads the rankings like no other. Despite the fact that the progress race around raiding does not generate the same amount of revenue from sponsorships and prize money, the guilds participating put in a lot of effort. In an interview with an online games newspaper the founder of *Method* revealed that each member of their raid team is expected to spend fourteen hours a day for the first ten days after the release of a new raid online trying to beat the new content (Barrett, 2017). This is no different than a high-profile athlete training for the most important competition of the year and in this light, raids can most certainly be seen as sports events.

Sports events can be large occasions with countless involved people besides the actual athletes. Often, those occasions have strong ritualistic aspects, sometimes with, sometimes without religious backgrounds. Even if a sports event does not have any inherent religious function, it can be argued that sports are in fact highly ritualised and act out values and worldviews of the

audience and participants (Grimes, 2013). The almost religious fervour of dedicated fans, the chants in the stadium, the way in which big games are being reported in the media, all of this strongly resembles religious activities and enables citizens of secular societies to feel connected by something that is greater than them. Raids strongly resemble team sports with their emphasis on teamwork, team positions to fill and a captain or trainer - the raid leader - to lead the way. Often, there are also other people besides the actual raiders involved into the raid like the people who have written guides or an audience that watches via a stream.

However, as Grimes (2013) points out, sports games are competitive, there are winners and losers. The ritual on the other hand knows no winners and losers, it knows only success and failure. The raid is more like the ritual in this aspect, as it also does not know winners and losers - either the whole group makes it, or nobody does.

5.4.3. Polythetic definitions of ritual

Contemporary ritual studies often agree that rituals are so diverse that there is no such definition that fits them all, therefore they often favour polythetic definitions. Brosius, Michaels and Schrode (2013: 13-15) formulate eight such characteristics which tend to correspond with rituals and, non-surprisingly, with raids (and to a smaller extent, with dungeons):

- 1) Rituals are acts with which humans intend to impact their (social, physical, spiritual, etc.) surroundings.

Participants in raids most certainly affect their environment. On one hand, raiding is only possible if people actively act in a particular way and on the other hand, raids form social bonds between the participants.

- 2) Rituals are deliberate, conscious, planned performances, even if subconscious aspects exist.

There is no such thing as an unplanned or accidental raid, it is always a deliberate enterprise. Even if a large group of players spontaneously decides to try their hand at a raid, they still have to prepare by getting character enhancing items ready and, if they want to increase their success-rate, by reading guides on the raid.

- 3) Rituals are framed - they happen within a certain timeframe and/or at a special place, they often have a clearly defined beginning and end, and frequently have clear objective. This sets them apart from everyday life as special acts.

The raid is framed many fold - first, it is an instance, a space that is intentionally set apart geographically and game-play wise from the rest of the virtual world. Second, it has a very clear start and end, beginning with entering the instance and ending with exiting it, hopefully after all the enemies inside are defeated. Third and last, there is a clear objective - defeat all the bosses inside and get rewards.

- 4) Rituals are characterised by a formal, stylised, and sometimes stereotypical performance and deviations from it get noticed. Sometimes the rules to the performance are codified.

The behaviour of raid participants is strongly regulated and codified. Someone who plays a healing character cannot suddenly decide to stop healing altogether and deal damage to opponents instead and often the sequence of the bosses inside the raid is fixed and cannot be changed. Perhaps most striking however is how players regulate each other's behaviour and demand observance to certain unofficial guidelines that were found out through trial and error and codified in online guides. Those guidelines, if strictly adhered to, almost guarantee success and are therefore taken very seriously. They include which exact path to take inside the raid to avoid run-ins with minor, but time consuming, opponents, which attacks to use at which precise moment and what kind of character classes to include in the raid in the first place. Players who do not stick to those rules run the danger of being treated with fury and excluded.

- 5) Rituals have meaning and spark a reaction in the people or social groups involved in them. This meaning might be, for instance, connected to spirituality or descent, it might be transcendental or have relevance on a societal level.

Raids definitely have a huge meaning for *World of Warcraft* players on a societal and personal level, perfectly expressed by one respondent to my online survey who stated that "raiding gives everything I do in the game a purpose" (November 5, 2018). For the individual, raids offer the chance to upgrade their social status, as well as provide entertainment, for the group, they create connection and a feeling of belonging at best and a way to introduce new players into societal norms at worst.

- 6) Rituals are effective and, at least from the emic perspective, make something happen. The effects are not trivial but have important consequences.

The raid is effective in more than one way. On one hand it works to amplify social relations and creates power structures, on the other hand it works exactly as the emic perspective claims - as a source for equipment and social status. For the participants of raids, who seek better equipment, collectible items or recognition from their peers, a successful raid is very effective

in gaining all the above. Someone who does not play *World of Warcraft* might not see the importance of them, but for a gamer, those feats are not trivial. Perhaps there is even a third layer of efficacy: that of lore. Users perform a story while raiding and these stories are part of the wider lore of *World of Warcraft*.

7) Rituals are consciously constructed, more or less rule-bound, relatively stable and symbolic patterns for activity that are supported by and shared within a social group.

Even without the extensive player guides to raids, raiding follows a clearly defined path and groups must know exactly what to do if they want to succeed. There can be some trial and error, but unless the group figures out the solution to the puzzle that is the raid, they will fail. The guides that are written by players for players are circulated in the user community help raid groups avoid the process of figuring out the raid's patterns by themselves and instead offer clear instructions for how to act. Unless someone comes up with a shortcut or some previously unknown trick and changes the raid guide, most raiders will adhere to the tested and tried way of doing things. This brings us to the last characteristic of rituals.

8) Rituals are not rigid and unchanging, but dynamic and process-oriented.

Raids too change over time. With the release of a new patch, enemies in raids might get stronger, but the players do as well. A patch also often means that some character classes see some changes in their abilities, so of course the raid guides have to take this into consideration. Raiding also changes for the individual player and the group when users improve their skills and their avatars.

The understanding of raids as rituals is also supported by the more process-oriented definition of ritual offered by Grimes (2013: 193). He points out that there is no clear separation between "ritual" and "not ritual", instead actions and events display degrees of "ritualisation" on a continuum. According to Grimes (2013: 194) there are eleven ways to ritualise actions, most of which can be observed in connection with raiding:

1) traditionalizing [AN: American spelling in the original] them, for instance, by claiming that they originated a long time ago or with the ancestors

Raids are anchored in the lore of the *Warcraft* universe.

2) elevating them by associating them with sacredly held values, those that make people who they are and that display either how things really are or how they ought to be

During a perfect raid the participants show behaviour that is highly valued by the *World of Warcraft* community - they are concentrated, knowledgeable, disciplined, prepared, skilful and spend considerable time on the game.

3) repeating them - over and over, in the same way - thus inscribing them in community and/or self

The same raid always follows the same course and raid parties often complete the same raid every week for a year, doing the same things over and over again.

4) singularizing them, that is, offering them as rare or even one-time events

Raids are different from other parts of *World of Warcraft* in that players only can complete them once a week and have to wait for the weekly reset of the raid to try again. This is a unique feature of raids, since other aspects of the virtual world have much faster reset times.

5) prescribing their details so they are performed in the proper way

Successful raiders follow exact guidelines on how to act during a raid. They know where to stand, what ability to use at which exact time and how to move through the space of the raid.

6) stylizing them, so they are carried out with flare [sic]

Assuming that Grimes meant to use “flair” here, this aspect is true for raiding as well. Raiders are always looking for the most efficient and elegant strategy, reducing unnecessary movement and actions.

7) entering them with a non-ordinary attitude or in a special state of mind, for example, contemplatively or in trance

Most raid parties expect their members to prepare and use powerful food that increases their avatars’ abilities, in contrast to dungeons and other parts of the game, where this is not a prerequisite for participation.

8) invoking powers to whom respect or reverence is due - gods, royalty, and spirits, for example

Although the most difficult opponents in raids are often supernatural beings or god-like villains, I would like to argue that the powers that are respected and celebrated through the raid relate to one of the basic principles of MMORPGs - the need for constant improvement of the avatar.

9) attributing to them special power or influence

Especially skilful and successful raiders have a high social status amongst *World of Warcraft* players and members of some famous raid guilds are treated as revered celebrities.

10) situating them in special places and/or times

Raids and dungeons are instanced areas of the game that allow multiple groups to interact with the area without disturbance from others at the same time. This sets raids and dungeons apart from other spaces of the game world. Additionally, raids are often planned ahead and players have to adjust their real-life schedules to participate.

11) being performed by specially qualified persons

Not just anyone can successfully participate in a raid, the avatar has to have reached a certain (usually high) level and the player controlling it must have learned how to properly use its abilities. Often other qualifications like a certain gear score or previous experience are needed as well.

5.4.4. Ritual mistakes and the failed raid

The success of rituals and ritual studies lies, amongst other things, in the tension between the script or the ritual and the performance of it (Brosius et al., 2013). When it comes to raids, this suspense is central - the script of a raid is clearly defined, but participants must discover and learn it before they are able to accurately perform it. Only when the performance is perfect, the raid and the ritual is successful. Usually, whether a ritual is considered a success depends on perspective. In the context of the raid a ritual mistake would be the failure to complete the raid due to a wipe, aka the death of the entire raid party. According to Hüsken (2013), failed rituals can also be useful to the group, for instance in order to demolish hierarchies or exclude specific people. The blame for a mistake during a ritual can be put onto an individual, on a few participants or can be shared with the whole group. The failure can lay bare the tensions within the social group and open a way for a solution. In *World of Warcraft*, ritual failures are very common. Raid groups usually have to go through several failed attempts before they finally manage to succeed. Depending on the social dynamics of the group, they might identify one person who is supposedly at fault and exclude them in the hopes of making it next at the next attempt or they try to improve their teamwork. The reactions to failed raids were incredibly valuable for my research since successful raids do not often get reviewed into detail afterwards, while failed raids frequently create anger and lead to detailed discussions about who is to blame. This, in turn, let me examine the social structure of the gamer community.

5.4.5. The raid - a liminal space in a liminoid activity

One of the central concepts in Turner's ritual research is liminality - describing the in-betweenness of the participants of a ritual. The term, coming from the Latin word "limen", meaning threshold, was first used to describe the ritual process by van Gennep (2005 [1909]) several years before Turner. The ritual takes place in between the usual social life, it is outside of social structure. Similarly, often the participants themselves stand outside of society, especially when it comes to rites of passage. As Turner (1969: 95) formulated it: "liminal personae" are "[...] neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention [...]". Van Gennep initially only used the term liminality for the middle part of the three-partite rite of passage, but Turner found liminality to be a central aspect of all types of ritual. As his studies progressed and Turner turned his gaze to industrial societies, he recognised ritual-like events and activities in there as well. As mentioned when discussing the critique on Turner, the problematic dichotomy between modern and traditional that can be found all throughout Turner's work, becomes evident in his distinction between liminal and liminoid.

For Turner, ritual and liminality always had religious connotations, a characteristic that many ritual-like events in industrial societies missed, even though Turner's ritual concept fits them perfectly otherwise. Therefore, Turner developed the term liminoid - it is to liminal as ritual-like is to ritual. The distinction between the two lies in the obligation to participate. The liminal, according to Turner native to traditional societies, is mandatory because it has religious or mythic roots, while the liminoid is optional and belongs to industrial societies.

Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory (though, indeed, fear provokes nervous laughter from the women, who, if they are touched by the makishi, are believed to contract leprosy, become sterile, or go mad!). (Turner, 1974: 74)

That is not to say that participating in a liminoid event cannot feel like it is an obligation or that there are not liminal events in parts of industrial societies, but usually, it is possible to avoid participation, even if it may come with a cost. According to Turner (Turner, 1974), it is different in traditional societies. Turner sees the reasons in the differences between traditional and industrial societies, a central one being the separation between "work" and "play". Those two are strictly separated in industrial societies and work has connotations of obligation, productivity and labour. Liminoid events and activities distort, mask and invert structural

activity and they are usually reserved for play - the free time away from work that individuals are able to design for themselves. They can join clubs, attend sports and music events and engage with religion and experience liminoid, ritual-like events in those spaces. On the contrary, in a traditional context, there is no such separation between work and play. Work also often has mythic, religious and holy meaning, just as play does. Rituals, and therefore liminal activity, are incorporated in the work-play continuum. With connotations like these, it is easily understandable why opting out of participating in ritual activity is not as easy.

While I disagree with Turner's distinction between modern and traditional societies and the heavy emphasis on religion to define liminal spaces, the concept of obligation versus option is interesting and lends itself perfectly to the situation of raiding. *World of Warcraft* itself clearly is a liminoid activity. It was developed as a leisure activity and is completely optional. However, in order to progress in the community of the virtual world, some activities become mandatory. Turner describes a quite similar observation:

There are permanent 'liminoid' settings and spaces, too-bars, pubs, some cafés, social clubs, etc. But when clubs become exclusivist they tend to generate rites of passage, with the liminal a condition of entrance into the 'liminoid' realm. (Turner, 1974: 86)

Although the raid is sometimes used as an initiation ritual, especially when it comes to proving a player's skill and worth, usually it resembles more a recurring ritual to confirm the continuing membership to a certain group, like taking part in the holy communion in church services. To stay part of the guild, to prove one's dedication to the game, taking part in raids is key. Some raid guilds have explicit policies stating how many raids a player can miss before they get evicted from the guild, others do not have such overt rules, but imply that taking part is highly recommended. Of course, it is also possible to play *World of Warcraft* without participating in raids, but many players feel that they only started to get serious about the game when they started raiding. To continue with the holy communion analogy: it is possible to attend church and join in with the prayers for years without participating in the communion, but others might not take them for full members unless they do.

Aside from the obligation to participate in raids that marks the liminal according to Turner, raids also happen in spaces that are liminal. Let us call in mind that raids are instanced parts of the virtual world, so they are physically separated from the rest. The spaces in which raids happen are reserved entirely for raids, they serve no other purpose. Players who enter them leave the virtual world that is depicted on maps and appear in this in-between world, they are neither here nor there, just as Turner describes the participants on rituals. Theoretically, players

not inside the raid can still reach them via the chat function or via an external voice chat program like *TeamSpeak*, but often the raiders are too busy keeping up to respond to messages not directly related to their raid. My guild, for instance, moved all the raid conversation via *TeamSpeak* to a private channel so they could be undisturbed. Entering this channel without being part of the raid group was considered to be rude.

Liminality is not the only aspect of Turner's ritual concepts that can easily be applied to the raid in *World of Warcraft* - "communitas" and, even more so, "flow" also work exceptionally well.

5.4.6. *Communitas of the raid group*

Turner developed the term *communitas* to describe the intense feeling of connectedness that overcomes participants of rituals, especially initiands during the liminal phase, as summed up perfectly by St John (2008: 7):

Communitas: An instant, spontaneous feeling of relatedness and community, unobstructed by class, role, status, gender, sex, age etc that forms between individuals that are currently in the same liminal stage on the edges of structured social life.

Communitas, with its "spontaneous, immediate, concrete nature", is the opposite to "the norm-governed, institutionalized, abstract nature" of social structure (Turner 1969: 127). It is the refuge from the usual order of things and daily life. Many authors, among them Turner (1969: 113) himself, recognised that the phenomenon of *communitas* is found all over the world, that participants of initiation rites as well as audiences of rock concerts could find themselves in this state: "[T]he collective dimensions, *communitas* and structure, are to be found at all stages and levels of culture and society."

However, *communitas* cannot stand alone, it is always tied together with structure. There exists a dialectic between the freedom to be and act as you please and the security and functionality of social order. According to Turner, *communitas* cannot persist over a longer period of time, there will arise the need to set boundaries and to codify behaviour, which ends the phase of *communitas* and introduces social structure. The other way around, if social order gets to repressive, activities that induce *communitas* will happen to loosen up things.

Communitas in *World of Warcraft* is a peculiar thing. On one hand, the virtual world itself has many features of *communitas*, especially if it is seen in context with the real world outside of the game. Personal traits like class, role, status, age and, to a smaller extend, gender play a much smaller part in how a player tries to depict themselves online and how they can interact with

others than they would in the so-called real life. The virtual world is a place for enjoyment, a place where the players go to take their minds off their daily lives and where they do not wish to be reminded of reality. The general sense is that *World of Warcraft* players have to stick together, even if there are differences in real life, because within the game, they are equal. On the other hand, the virtual world by no means is free of stratification and rules. Many of them accumulate around raiding - who gets to be part of the raid group, what roles they must fulfil, how to move along inside the raid. But despite this strictly structured endeavour, there are instances of true, spontaneous *communitas* happening during raids. The feeling of collectively fighting an enemy, relying on your team members, moving as one, and then finally defeating the opponent - it is an incredible feeling of elation and connectedness with the other people who made this possible. In this moment, it is completely irrelevant who they are in their daily life and how they performed during this raid, the group succeeded together and is celebrating together. Several of my interlocutors, among them guild master Etti, referred to those moments as the best parts of the entire game. She even argued that very ambitious players who raided a lot were especially looking for this collective feeling of “we accomplished something that was really hard” (Etti, January 8, 2017, translated from German⁴⁰).

Those moments are what makes the pressure, the schedules, the guide-reading and the preparation that are necessary for successful raiding worth the trouble. Again, Turner perfectly puts this feeling into words: “Structural action swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of *communitas*” (Turner, 1969: 139).

5.4.7. Flow

Turner himself recognised the connection of his concept of *communitas* to psychologist Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow” as experienced *communitas* feels similarly as being in the state of “flow”. Csikszentmihalyi explains “flow” as:

The autotelic experience is one of complete involvement of the actor with his activity. The activity presents constant challenges. There is no time to get bored or to worry about what may or may not happen. A person in such a situation can make full use of whatever skills are required and receives clear feedback to his actions, hence, he belongs to a

⁴⁰ “Und ich glaube, die Leute, die super ehrgeizig am Spielen und am Raiden sind, die vermissen genau diesen Kick. Beziehungsweise, die sind nur mehr auf der Suche danach. Nach diesem Gemeinschaftlichen ‘wir haben was geschafft was richtig schwer war’”

ration cause-and-effect system in which what he does has realistic and predictable consequences

and goes on to state that

In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 36)

One difference between *communitas* as Turner understands it and Csikszentmihalyi's flow is that the latter can be encouraged by the existence of structure, while *communitas* by its very nature is anti-structure. A state of flow can be induced by a centring of attention on a single subject, for instance on a game. The existence of rules helps with focusing because said rules dismiss the existence of anything outside of the current game. "The structured, rule governed play is 'designed' to make the player feel free from constraint or to feel 'in flow'" (Lewis, 2013: 27). For Turner, the similarities between flow and *communitas* despite their opposing origins posed a bit of a problem. He saw flow to be already in the domain of structure, while *communitas* was always anti-structural. He (Turner, 1974: 89) solved it by declaring: "But 'flow', for me, seems to be one of the ways in which 'structure' may be transformed or 'liquefied' [...] into *communitas* again".

Computer gaming in general, of course, is exceptionally well equipped to get players into a state of flow and *World of Warcraft* is no exception. Raids take it even further because the demanding game play situation requires the user to pay full attention to raiding and there are clear structures and rules for behaviour. Turner (1974: 87-89) notes six characteristics of a flow experience and, not surprisingly, they fit a good raid experience like a glove:

- 1) The experience of merging action and awareness.

People in the flow state are not aware that they are in a state of flow, even if they might very well be aware of what they are doing. Realising they are in flow brings them out of it.

- 2) Centering of attention on a limited stimulus field. Consciousness must be narrowed, intensified, beamed in on a limited focus of attention.

The person in flow is completely in the now, all their attention is focused in their current activity. When in a raid, a player has to direct all their attention to their character and its surroundings, everything else becomes irrelevant.

3) The actor is immersed in the 'flow', he accepts the rules as binding which are also binding on the other actors-no self is needed to 'bargain' about what should or should not be done.

In a state of flow, the person forgets their ego and feels connected to everyone around them. This also hold true for the raid, where the player feels completely as a part of the team.

4) A person 'in flow' finds himself in control of his actions and of the environment.

A person in flow finds that their skills are matching the demands of the activity and stops worrying about anything holding them back. For raiding it means they find themselves able to keep up and progress through the raid without much difficulty.

5) 'Flow' usually contains coherent, non-contradictory demands for action, and provides clear, unambiguous feedback to a person's actions.

The objective and the rules are clear during a raid, there is no confusion about what needs to be done. If, for any reason, the player fails to follow this clear call for action, they immediately receive feedback in the form of damage to their characters.

6) Finally 'flow' is 'autotelic', i.e., it seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself: To flow is to be as happy as a human can be.

Even if there are rewards to be gained from raiding, during the raid this is irrelevant. Raiding, delighting in one's abilities and the camaraderie is fun and enjoyable.

At this point I have to admit that I personally did not experience a state of flow during a raid while I was doing my field work, but I have experienced it in other related parts of the game, especially in dungeons. Struggling to fulfil my role in the raid while trying to keep alert and observant of potentially research relevant information at the same time did allow me to embrace the raid experience like I managed to do with dungeons, which I had much more practise with. However, several people that I talked to and even more who responded to my surveys stated that raiding was immensely enjoyable for them. Naturally, they did appreciate the spoils of the raid, like loot, experience and social status, but they also loved the experience itself.

In conclusion, my understanding of the raid as a ritual within the context of *World of Warcraft* is based on the possibility of experiencing *communitas* and flow, on the liminal and liminoid nature of both virtual worlds and the raid in particular and on the fact that polythetic definitions of ritual could very well also describe raids. Yet, Brosius, Michaels and Schrode (2013) point out that different actors can perceive the same ritual in various frameworks without distorting the main function of the ritual. Therefore, the value of the raid as an activity that creates and secures social relations and generates status stays the same, whether participants want to see it as an e-sport competition, pure entertainment with friends, or, like me, as a ritual.

However, using the ritual framework has its clear benefits if one wants to explain the social pressure users experience in connection with raids.

5.5. Explaining social violence by analysing the raid as a ritual

The last chapter explained why it is possible and reasonable to analyse the raid as a ritual and this chapter will point out the benefits of doing so. By employing Maurice Bloch's research on the role of violence in a ritual process to the raid, this chapter will examine the use of social pressure in connection with raiding.

5.5.1. Bloch & Violence

I want to start by bringing to mind Bloch's research on rituals in Madagascar (1988) and the insights he gained from closely analysing the Merina circumcision ritual. The Merina people of Madagascar are organised into bilateral descent groups called "deme" with a communal, ancestral tomb as the central identification point. Further, the Merina worldview is ordered into "hasina" and "mahery" - the first being associated with the ancestors, with civilization, social descent, dryness, cold, purity, wisdom, death and unity, the latter with living beings, nature, biological descent, wetness, heat, dirt, power, life and separation. Everything, including animals, plants and humans, has its place in the hasina - mahery-system, depending on its qualities. Being or becoming hasina is the highest honour a Merina can achieve, but the living are always also associated with mahery, young people and, especially, women more so than old people or men because they are considered closer to reproduction and therefore to nature. The bilateral nature of the descent group deme makes women and their reproductive abilities dangerous for society in another way, since, if they chose to reproduce with someone from another deme group, their offspring would have rights to the women's ancestral lands. An "outsider" might then dwell on the ancestral lands, threatening the highly prized unity (associated with hasina) of the deme. Despite the value that is placed on hasina properties,

society could not exist without mahery - after all, mahery is associated with life and reproduction. Therefore, things, activities and people attributed with mahery properties are dangerous to the deme group, but they are a necessary evil. In order to control those mahery things, they are therefore ritually humiliated and put into their place by use of symbolic and actual violence. The dangerous, but necessary mahery is being dominated by the hasina parts of society, this, in turn, also cements the higher status of hasina. In the circumcision ritual, this ritualistic domination is performed by stealing and destroying plants associated with fertility, by mocking women and by threatening mahery objects with spears. Finally, the prepuce of the boy in the centre of the ritual is cut off, separating him further from his natural mahery state and making him more of a socialised hasina being. By showing dominance over nature, human society is being lifted up. The women, who are firmly a part of the deme descent group, benefit from this too in their role as group members, even though their role as women is being ritually violated. Therefore, they participate in the ritual because they identify with the dominant group and aspire to become a part of them.

Bloch argues that in this way the ritual is used to legitimise the dominance of the powerful, but that the ritual itself does not give them the power to put themselves into this authoritative position.

5.5.2. Bloch's model translated to World of Warcraft

In *World of Warcraft* exist a power hierarchy, just as in Merina society on Madagascar, even if the similarities are not apparent at first. First off, the violence that is used to oppress members of the virtual world obviously is not the same physical threatening and beating that can be used in Merina rituals because *World of Warcraft*, as a digital game, lacks the physical component that would make it possible. But there is more than just one type of violence and *World of Warcraft* users, as already shown, are exposed to social and systematic violence, most notable verbal abuse, exclusion, expulsion and the requirement to fulfil very high expectations. According to Johan Galtung, the renowned peace and conflict researcher, violence “[...] is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (Galtung, 1969: 168). In a later publication, Galtung (1990) focuses on cultural violence - the aspects of culture that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence. In the end, all types of violence have the same general use: to keep people under control. In *World of Warcraft's* case, social and cultural violence is used to coerce players to follow the implicit rules the player community set for themselves, which creates a hierarchy and keeps players low on the hierarchy from the participation in end

game content like raiding. The raid, as the most important ritual within the virtual world, plays a major role in creating this hierarchy and justifying it at the same time.

Despite *Blizzard's* attempts to make *World of Warcraft* more inclusive and accessible to everyone because the company profits from this, players make their own social rules and often counteract *Blizzard's* attempts. An example of this would be the introduction of the raid finder tool, that was intended to enable players to quickly find group members. While it made the grouping up process notably faster, players were equally quick to introduce hallmarks like item level to determine which players were good and which were not, effectively excluding many users that would have had better chances in the slower, but more personal system previous to the raid finder tool.

Back in the day everything was slower and costed more effort and patience. For instance, we had to find our own group in the chat, travel to the dungeon and complete the entire dungeon together! During all of that you had enough time to chat and get to know each other a little. And after a wipe you simply tried again. I am under the impression that now everything has to be chop chop quick and if a player does not know the strategy of all the bosses he is a noob and is kicked right away. (*Facebook* post, December 26, 2016, translated from German⁴¹)

While this process might seem unfair to new players, seasoned players actually have very good reasons for impeding the access to high end game content: they want their hard work to stay worthwhile.

A similar situation was documented by Christopher A. Paul (2010) after the lead content designer of *World of Warcraft* called a set of newly introduced rewards for PvP (player versus player) achievements “welfare epics”. The player community erupted in outrage, with one side trying to prove that their focus of the game, in this case PvP content which consisted of arenas and battlegrounds, was not inferior to PvE (player versus environment) content and that the new set of epic equipment rewards was justified and earned. The other side, the PvE players which were comprised of raiders, felt that their hard work in raids became of lesser value if there was a chance for non-raiders to earn equally good equipment by “just” spending enough time in

⁴¹ “Früher ging alles langsamer und mit mehr Mühe und Geduld. Beispielsweise mussten wir uns selbst eine Gruppe im Chat zusammensuchen, zum Dungeon reisen und gemeinsam durch die komplette Instanz! Währenddessen hatte man genug Zeit über alles Mögliche zu quatschen und sich etwas kennenzulernen. Und nach einem Wipe hat man es eben nochmal versucht. Ich habe den Eindruck, dass jetzt alles zack zack schnell gehen muss und wenn mal ein Spieler nicht die Strategie von allen Bossen kennt, ist er ein Noob und wird direkt gekickt.”

battlegrounds and arenas. Raiders argued that the challenges of working in large teams of up to forty people and having to learn strategies for the boss fights justified receiving better rewards for their “work”, while PvP players demanded recognition for the countless hours they poured into doing battleground and arena fights and the complexity of fighting unpredictable players. The outrage over the term “welfare epics” exposed the simmering conflict between PvP and PvE players, who each thought their way of playing to be the superior and more difficult one. Despite their differences, both explicitly disliked the idea of receiving rewards they did not deserve and hated the idea of others receiving such rewards even more. They felt like their hard work would be devalued by that. The same is still true for players today, who are proud of what they have achieved and do not want to see that diminished by granting “easy access” to newbies.

At the same time, however, newbies are essential to the survival of the virtual world. Bartle describes the problem with a bucket analogy:

Imagine that your virtual world is a bucket, and players are water. There are holes in the bucket through which the water escapes. If you don’t add water regularly, eventually it will all leak away. (Bartle 2004: 141)

Game developers know of the importance of new players for virtual worlds and even users who might not appreciate newbies are aware that never getting new members makes a game stale and eventually contributes to its demise. Therefore, virtual worlds and their users often present themselves as open and helpful to newbies. Of the 193 respondents to my survey, 83% stated that they liked to help others in the game. However, users also showed understandable frustration at hearing or reading the same questions over and over, especially since there are ample resources online to all kind of topics regarding *World of Warcraft*, if only you know where to look. Unfortunately, this can be a difficult hurdle for new players:

I feel you. I am stuck with so much because of that same reason. When you ask people for help or instructions they kick you or ‘google’ (*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016).

In general, in order to be respected, new players must be fast learners and show a lot of determination and initiative. Otherwise, they quickly fall into the category of the casual player in other’s eyes. Those two cannot be distinguished without a more thorough investigation into the players’ achievements, so new and casual players often get the same treatment and are barred from entry to high end content like raids. This kind of gatekeeping, I argue, is structural violence. As already mentioned, there are different ways to define “casual” in *World of Warcraft*, but generally, they are they are seen as a group of people which does not take the

game “seriously”, aka puts a lot of effort and time into progressing through high end content. Despite that, many casual players still spend a lot of time in game and are often vital to social structures because they care more about their friendships online than achievements. In many cases, casual players belong to the socializer-type, but because sociability is not valued much among raiders, the social elite of *World of Warcraft*, it does not count as “being serious” about the game.

However, despite their differing priorities, most casual players still want to experience raiding. Dungeons and raids always had an important place in the virtual world, but their importance has increased even more over the course of the last expansion packs. Nowadays, many central quest chains end in raids, so even casual players who only want to follow the central storylines on the virtual world are required to raid. Even aside from this fact, raiding poses a challenge that cannot be faced elsewhere in the game and can be a lot of fun, so casual players want to raid - but on their own terms. They prefer a slower pace, more time for explanations and chatting, as well as a relaxed atmosphere with less pressure to succeed. This conflicts with the demands of hardcore players, who share many characteristics with Bartle’s achiever-type and who care about progressing, competing and constantly improving, this poses a certain threat - in their opinion, time is precious and should not be wasted on merely having fun.

Casual players threaten social norms around raiding by not caring all that much about having to be perfectly prepared, being fast and knowing tactics and strategies. If they were allowed to take part in raiding while remaining their lax attitude, raiding would change - it would become slower, less focused and more social, as in more jokes, more chatting, more “hanging out” instead of strategically working towards a goal. Time is the most important resource within *World of Warcraft* and wasting time on things that are not valued by achievers like social relations and exploring is an offense. Casual players usually are slower in raids and slow their team members down, so they are a nuisance to hardcore players who want to use their game time effectively and have difficulty imagining that others do not care about improving as much as they do. Seasoned raiders, who have undergone the tedious process of learning and working their way up the social ladder, feel threatened by new or casual players who want easy access and they therefore enforce rules and exclude anyone who does not adhere to the status quo - in short, using their high social status and structural violence to make lower status players obey the social rules. Even though few players express it so vividly, the following comment is a good example of how many hardcore players feel about their encounters with casual players in raids:

[T]he casuals usually DONT care about improving. They slack off, hence why they are casual, you point out their mistake and try to help, and they go: ‘lol whatever I play for fun’ Now who is the asshole? (*Facebook post*, December 3, 2016)

Closer examination of the relationship between casual and hardcore players reveals a deep rift in *World of Warcraft* community. On one side stand the casual players, who want to take part in every facet of the game without wanting or having the chance to focus too much on a single aspect and who feel excluded from raids and dungeons by the hardcore players, who they perceive as elitist and abusive. On the other side are the hardcore players, who are motivated by excelling at the most demanding parts of the game and who therefore focus on perfecting their performances in raids and dungeons. They see their success threatened by casual players who are not up to their standards and therefore use their dominance in this prestigious area to establish prerequisites like item level and experience that must be met. To enforce those rules, players who do not perform accordingly get verbally abused and kicked out. Usually, users do so without ill intentions, they feel that they are in their good right to choose who they want to spend their time with and have difficulty comprehending how this could be seen as elitist and violent. Tangled inside this web of structural violence, the ones benefitting from the system are often oblivious to the effects the violence has on the less fortunate ones. From a hardcore player’s point of view, everyone can achieve what they have achieved if they only try hard enough.

A casual should never ever be on top of the game. That's why casuals are casuals. A casual is a player who dont have the time or will to put in more effort to reach the top end in a game. It blows my mind how many casual players actually complains about stuff like this” (*Facebook post*, December 3, 2016)

Just because the dominant people benefit from a system that values their skills and ambitions over others does not mean that they understand that system and purposefully oppress the others. As Bloch points out: “If we are to see ideology as mystification, we have to face the fact that in most cases the power-holders are as mystified as anybody else” (Bloch, 1988: 177).

Despite this rift, casual players are necessary for the virtual world. They make up a large part of the player base and, if we consider that casual players are often social players, they are, according to Bartle, the player type that sticks to the virtual world the longest. They are the ones that form the social base that not only the social player type appreciates. Guilds for instance are often advertised as “socially active” or “friendly”, meaning that there are enough active players

to talk to and to keep you company. Also, players often change their gaming focus over time. Several interviewees stated that they used to be casual players and started to get into raiding only after several years of playing. However, it can also be the other way around, as for instance Dirk, one of my guild members, told me. He used to be more focused on progressing through increasingly difficult game content, but then he stepped back from organising raids and now appreciates the social side of the game more. But it must be taken into account that Dirk, despite claiming to focus on social relations, had several of the best equipped characters I had ever seen and he was part of every raid my guild organised.

So casual players also often become skilled raiders if they get the chance to participate and learn. Players of the socializer-type often genuinely enjoy raiding, although for different reasons than the achiever-types. Since raiding relies heavily on teamwork and cooperation with other people, socializers can feel at home in this environment. Etti, the leader of my guild, was a prime example of this. She was the social hub of the guild, chatting with everyone and joining dungeons and raids for the sake of having adventures with friends. Although she claimed to not care a lot about improving her avatar or being on top of raid rankings, she was a very capable raider who enjoyed working together with her guild members.

The anonymity on quickly automatically assembled groups via the raid finder tool or the LFR (looking for raid) function increases the hostility that casual players face, because casual players cannot play their strengths - being social - in this short-timed setting. Instead, those groups are fashioned to the needs of the achiever-type hardcore players and reward skill and speed over social interaction. In guilds, however, social casual players can form bonds and use their social abilities. Often, they are therefore tolerated and even appreciated, despite their lack of raid skills.

The players who face the social pressure and social violence often accept it as part of the game, as something that is normal in online gaming spaces. They either adopt the social norms as their own and try to adhere to them, as one player put it: “its the interwebs..... not really a place for overly sensitive peeps...” (*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016) or they leave the virtual world, like this ex-player did:

There much wrong with end game and the social part of the game. It's such hard work to get anywhere due to idiots everywhere and I have just stopped playing as I can't be bothered to deal with all the negativity. I have quit a couple of times before for different reasons but this time I don't see myself going back. (*Facebook* post, December 3, 2016)

A minority refuses to accept the status quo and tries to change it, some by questioning the current state on social media, others by forming groups to counteract the social norms they find unacceptable:

Hahaha maybe we should all jump onto a server together and create a guild called. the casuals ok we can work on the name. We can support and wipe with each other without getting annoyed. (*Facebook post*, December 3, 2016)

Those who accept the social norms of the virtual world and try to follow them often go on enforcing them once they reached a situation in which they have the power to exclude others. A major reason for new and casual players to accept the high expectations and social violence surrounding raiding is the idea that they can reach the heights of successful hardcore players too, if only they spend enough time and put in enough effort.

Just as with the Merina people who would never dream of abandoning their ancestors and the value system that is attached to them, even if inside this system they hold a position of little power and little hope of advancing, a *World of Warcraft* player does not question the importance of the raid and all the meaning that surrounds it. The virtual world is built on the premise to constantly improve and develop the players' avatars and everyone participates in this endeavour, although with varying degrees of dedication and skill. Successful raiders are the ones that are the best at it, while casual players follow the objective at a slower pace. Rejecting the basic principle of constant improvement means to question the game itself and likely leads to quitting *World of Warcraft* altogether. What Bloch (1988: 170) said for Merina society: "A revolt against descent would appear to be a revolt against oneself" is also true for the inhabitants of *Azeroth* - a revolt against the principle of constant improvement would appear to be a revolt against oneself as a gamer.

The raid is not the reason for the emphasis on constant improvement and the increasing speed of gameplay, but it is the place and the time where all the rifts in *World of Warcraft's* community come to light. In this sense, it is just as the circumcision ritual on Madagascar, which is not the reason for the Merinas' pursuit of *hasina* qualities, but simply the act where it can be observed in unmatched clarity. As the central ritual of *World of Warcraft*, the raid is just the setting in which the hidden power dynamics between the different player types become visible.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to determine the reason for the social and structural violence surrounding raiding in the virtual world *World of Warcraft*. It showed that the raid holds a special position for the community of *World of Warcraft* players that evokes feelings and functions of a ritual. As a central part of the virtual world that holds a lot of potential for status increase, but also always bares the risk of wasting resources in the case of failure, the ritual of the raid manages to make conflicts and rifts in the user community observable that otherwise stay invisible beneath the surface. Those conflicts between different types of players and differing attitudes towards the game become visible in the structural violence and social pressure - verbal abuse, exclusion, expulsion and high expectations - around and during the raid. Understanding the raid as a ritual allows us to see how this violence is used by hardcore players, whose interests, skills and playing styles align with the fundamental principle of constant improvement that drives the virtual world, to maintain their position of power over casual players, whose goals, abilities and style of play do not fit this principle as perfectly, but who are nonetheless of fundamental importance for the social reproduction of the virtual world.

My fascination with virtual worlds and the application of classic ethnographic methods like participant observation to a field like this was at the very beginning of this research project. Soon, this fascination was replaced by confusion about how players treated each other. I started to feel affected by the social pressure that was imminent in raids and dungeons very quickly after I started my fieldwork and it baffled me, especially since I am not a competitive person, yet I found myself comparing my achievements with others, logging my item level progression and getting angry at others who did not play as I thought they should. At the same time, I felt anxious signing up for raids and dungeons and devastated whenever I failed, yet I kept coming back for more despite the negative effects the rough social atmosphere had on me. If playing *World of Warcraft* had been a leisure activity for me, I would have stopped and done something else, but this was research and I was intrigued to find out the reason behind this system of social pressure. Participant observation was the main source of data collection for this research and I do not think there could have been a better way. Only through experiencing the thrill, pressure and exhilaration of raiding myself could I make sense of the player community's arguments and discussions, allowing me to understand them on a deeper level.

The outcome of this thesis was unclear. After realizing how well the description of rituals matched raiding, I decided to find out if this could help me explain the experiences of social

pressure and violence I shared with countless other players. The answer could very well have been no, but the more I got invested in ritual studies and the closer I compared the raid to rituals like the circumcision ritual in Bloch's work, the clearer it became that this worked. The chapters of this work follow my thought and learning process, starting with an overview of my research field *World of Warcraft* and followed by the introduction into the fascinating fields of ritual studies and digital anthropology. Those chapters laid the groundwork for the following discussion of the results of this research. In the second half of this text, I aimed to make the connection between raid and ritual. Chapter for chapter, I delved deeper into the subject, starting by evaluating the role of the raid for the community of *World of Warcraft* players. With the support of numerous quotes straight from the field I showed that for many users, raiding is a central part of the game. The players gain two major things from raiding: continually improving equipment and social interaction. However, there are also conflicts around raiding that the player community often collectively calls "toxic behaviour". The following chapter discussed how users are experiencing verbal abuse, exclusion and expulsion around raiding and how they are dealing with it. It also introduced "high expectations" as strongly related to the "triad of toxicity", showing how through exaggerated requirements highly skilled players are accomplishing gatekeeping against less experienced users. The next chapter delved into the reasoning players themselves offer for the social pressure and violence surrounding raids and combined them with research about player types and observations about the development of *World of Warcraft* over time. The conflicts often arose around questions of time and time-management, with the achiever-type players favouring fast and effective raiding, while socializer-type players enjoyed interacting with others, whether in the raid or outside. *World of Warcraft's* relatively recent changes of game design and in-game tools was to the advantage of achiever-type players and to the disadvantage of socializers. Finally, I made the connection from raid to ritual and clarified in the next chapter how the raid can be understood as a ritual and why, even though there are many resemblances, it is less useful to read the raid as a ritualised sport event or theatre. Analysing the raid as a ritual adequately shows the importance and meaning that the raid has for the community of *World of Warcraft* players and lends it to fruitful study by the researcher. In this light I could show that the raid not only fits contemporary definitions of ritual, but that the raid also produces *communitas* and *flow*, two qualities very important to the participants of raids. In the last chapter, I argued that yes, it is possible to explain player's experiences with social pressure and violence by analysing the raid as a ritual. Bloch has shown how violence can play a crucial role in ritual, justifying and determining existing power structures. Through verbal abuse, exclusion, expulsion and gatekeeping,

hardcore players are maintaining their position as the player group closest to embodying the quintessence of MMORPGs - constantly improving and enhancing themselves and their player characters. Those who either cannot or do not want to embrace this ideal in the same manner - the casuals - are left to fill the lower places in the virtual world's hierarchy, where they are crucial to ensure the social reproduction of the player community. Still, they share the general premise of continuous improvement and therefore accept the dominance of hardcore players as justified, even if their violent behaviour is not always tolerated.

Naturally, this research has several limitations. One of them is its time frame - Autumn 2016 to Autumn 2018. I started my field work in November 2016 and continued with it until the late Spring 2017, after which I stopped my research in-game and concentrated on secondary media channels like *Facebook* groups to attain participants for surveys, interviews and to follow discussions. Although there was a certain component of historic analysis, especially when interlocutors talked about developments they witnessed over time or when I acknowledged changes in the game's interface, I could not consider the entire span of *World of Warcraft's* existence. A virtual world of this age naturally has seen many changes over its fifteen years of lifetime and it would have been impossible to account for all of them in this mere master's thesis. However, a historic analysis of the role of the raid would be a fascinating topic for future research.

Another important limitation is my concentration on the player versus environment (PvE) side of the virtual world, leaving out player versus player (PvP) completely. Other papers (e.g. Paul, 2010) suggest that there is a rift between those who primarily engage in PvE activities and those that mainly participate in PvP, both parties feeling like they work harder than the other for their success. It would be interesting to find out if the distinction between casual and hardcore players exists in arena and battleground spaces as well and if it is as conflict-ridden as it is in raids. I would assume so, but due to restrictions in time, there was no chance for me to get into PvP activities on the same level as I could with PvE. I regularly participated in non-ranked battlegrounds and read the same insults and saw people being kicked just as in raids and dungeons, but since non-ranked battlegrounds are merely the lowest level of PvP activity, I do not know how this plays out in higher level activities like arena fights and ranked battlegrounds. Frankly, my inability to delve deeper into this topic stems from two major reasons: for one, my guild focused on raids and dungeons, not on arena or battleground matches and second, my personal abilities restricted me from engaging with PvP content on a higher level by myself. I have to admit that my skills at raiding were not good enough either to be accepted into a raid party only due to my abilities, but thanks to my guild and my special status as researcher, I was

allowed to tag along, while I had no comparable access to PvP content. A researcher with better gaming skills than I could gain complementary insights in the PvP side of *World of Warcraft*.

The final important limitation of my work lies in the fact that I only completed my research in a single virtual world and can therefore only state with certainty that within *World of Warcraft* there exist ritual-like activities that tell a lot about the social structure and conflicts of the virtual world. However, I would assume that *World of Warcraft* is not an outlier and that similar practices exist in other, if not in all, MMORPGs. Future studies might build on my research by evaluating this about other virtual worlds. These results would not only be of interest for social scientists, but also especially for developers of MMORPGs. Game designers are constantly trying to improve existing products and develop new ones that generate pleasant, engaging experiences for the players, their customers. Frustration about toxic behaviour is widespread in online games, as several interlocutors pointed out. While many players eventually learn to ignore or deal with it, it leads others to quit the game. By learning more about why this toxic behaviour exists and which factors play into it, game developers could make changes in their game designs to reduce the conflicts at the base of it, making their virtual world a more welcoming place. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, I would suggest making raiding optional again, freeing casual players from the necessity to participate and releasing hardcore players from the need to distance themselves from their casual counterparts. In turn, *Blizzard* could give casual players additional space to develop their interests and abilities in a way that does not inconvenience hardcore players by forcing them together. There will still always be new or inexperienced players that want to get into raiding, so the friction around the access to raids will most likely never stop completely, but it could be reduced.

I am not the first researcher to recognise the connection between ritualised behaviour and online games (e.g. Gazzard & Peacock, 2011; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009), but to my knowledge this thesis is among the firsts ones⁴² to go into so much depth to show the existence and meaning of ritual-like events in a MMORPG. The value of this thesis lies in the exploration of a contemporary topic - virtual worlds - with the help of a very old concept - ritual. It managed to elaborate on the connections and similarities between ritual studies and digital anthropology and accomplished to show how fruitful the combination of classic concepts and topics of social anthropology like ritual studies and contemporary fields like virtual worlds can be. This adds

⁴² Five years before me, Sapach (2015) used concepts of ritual and religious studies (drawing mostly from Durkheim) to study the development of social solidarity within *World of Warcraft* for her master's thesis.

another testimony to the growing body of scientific works that assume that social life in online contexts follows the same rules as its offline counterpart.

In many ways, writing this thesis was like learning how to raid. In both cases, there are guidelines on how to do it successfully, there are good examples to look up to and, if you are lucky, supervisors or friends to help you improve. Some parts are easy to understand and fun to do, while others are tedious, hard work and repeated failure. Raids have an inherent logic and a rule system that the raid party must figure out. They can only be successful if they manage to understand the raid in all its depth and can decipher how all the little pieces of boss mechanics, player placement, class composition and buff food work together, and if all the people involved are dedicated and persistent enough. It is the same for ethnographic research. Only when the committed and persevering researcher can make sense of all the little snippets of data and manages to put them together into a coherent frame can they complete their research. And it also involves buff food - in my case, many litres of black tea.

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8. Glossary

- Add-on: small, additional program by a third party designed to modify and improve the standard interface and help with the gameplay experience
- Alliance: one of the two factions
- *Azeroth*: the name of the fictional world that *World of Warcraft* is set in
- Battletag: the term for a sort of “user name” that lets players connect across servers and games
- *Blizzard*: the developing company of *World of Warcraft*
- Boosting: one or several high-level characters helping a lower-level character through game content that would otherwise be outside of their league, otherwise known as “carrying”
- Boss: a particularly difficult and strong NPC enemy, often found as the final challengers in dungeons or raids
- Carrying: one or several high-level characters helping a lower-level character through game content that would otherwise be outside of their league, otherwise known as “boosting”
- Cooldown abilities: an ability which’s use is restricted by a period of wait time. After it has been used, the player must wait a certain time before it can be used again. The cooldown time between abilities varies, ranging from a few seconds to several minutes, with the more powerful abilities generally taking longer to recharge
- Damage dealer: a player’s character which’s main function is to deal damage to opponents
- Damage per second: often shortened to “dps”, refers to the amount of damage points an avatar can deal to a target within a single second
- Discord: a computer software and mobile phone app with instant messaging and voice chat functions
- DPS meter: various add-on programs designed to measure the damage done per second
- Dungeon: an instanced part of *World of Warcraft* that is home to difficult opponents and lets a party of five or less players interact with it “privately”, without interference from other players
- Game master: an employee of *Blizzard* that occupies a role between virtual janitor and police officer. Game masters can be contacted within the game and in the official forum when problems with either the software or other players occur

- Gear score: the average number of a character's entire equipment, often used synonymously with item level
- Healer: a player's character which's main function is to heal group members
- Horde: one of the two factions
- Instance: special areas within *World of Warcraft* that let players interact with them privately
- Item level: the level of a piece of equipment, often used synonymously with gear score
- Loot: the rewards a defeated opponent leaves behind
- Mob: short for "mobile", refers to a computer-generated opponent that can move around
- Mount: ride-able equipment that enhances a character's speed or enables them to fly, having various forms from animal shape to motorcycles
- Noob: derogatory term for an inept or new player, deriving from "newbie"
- Pull: attracting an enemy's attention and causing them to attack
- PvE: Player versus Environment
- PvP: Player versus Player
- Raid: an instanced part of *World of Warcraft* that is home to difficult opponents and lets a party of thirty or less players interact with it "privately", without interference from other players
- Raid leader/ raid master: the player in charge of preparing the party for the raid and leading the group while inside the raid; a general of sorts
- Realm: another word for server
- Routine: the succession in which abilities are used in a fight
- Tank: a player's character which's main function is to protect group members from enemies' attacks
- *TeamSpeak*: a computer program with instant messaging and voice chat functions
- Trash mob: numerous rather easy opponents that must be cleared before advancing towards the boss

Abstract

This research aims to determine the reason for the social and structural violence surrounding raiding in the virtual world *World of Warcraft*. It shows that the raid holds a special position for the community of *World of Warcraft* players that evokes feelings and functions of a ritual. As a central part of the virtual world that holds a lot of potential for status increase, but also always bares the risk of wasting resources in the case of failure, the ritual of the raid manages to make conflicts and rifts in the user community observable that otherwise stay invisible beneath the surface. Those conflicts between different types of players and differing attitudes towards the game become visible in the structural violence and social pressure - verbal abuse, exclusion, expulsion and high expectations - around and during the raid. Understanding the raid as a ritual allows us to see how this violence is used by "hardcore" players, whose interests, skills and playing styles align with the fundamental principle of constant improvement that drives the virtual world, to maintain their position of power over "casual" players, whose goals, abilities and style of play do not fit this principle as perfectly, but who are nonetheless of fundamental importance for the social reproduction of the virtual world.

Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die Ursachen für die soziale und strukturelle Gewalt rund um „raiding“ in der virtuellen Welt *World of Warcraft* zu erklären. Diese Arbeit zeigt auf, dass der „Raid“ in der Gemeinschaft der *World of Warcraft* SpielerInnen eine spezielle Position einnimmt, die dieselben Funktionen eines Rituals innehat. Als zentraler Bereich der virtuellen Welt, der großes Potential für Statuserhöhungen beinhaltet, aber auch ständig das Risiko von verschwendeten Ressourcen im Falle eines Fehlschlages mit sich trägt, macht das Ritual des „Raids“ Konflikte und Risse in der Gemeinschaft der NutzerInnen beobachtbar, die normalerweise unter der Oberfläche verborgen bleiben. Diese Konflikte zwischen verschiedenen SpielerInnentypen und deren unterschiedlichen Herangehensweisen an das Spiel werden sichtbar anhand der strukturalen Gewalt und dem sozialen Druck - Beleidigungen, Ausgrenzung, Ausschluss und hohen Erwartungen - in und rund um den „Raid“. Den „Raid“ als Ritual zu verstehen erlaubt uns zu erkennen, wie „hardcore“ SpielerInnen diese Gewalt nutzen, um ihre Machtposition über „casual“ SpielerInnen zu bewahren. „Hardcore“ SpielerInnen befinden sich in dieser Machtposition, weil deren Interessen, Fähigkeiten und Spielstile mit dem fundamentalen Prinzip der konstanten Verbesserung, das der virtuellen Welt zugrunde liegt, übereinstimmen. Obwohl die Interessen, Fähigkeiten und Spielstile von „casual“ SpielerInnen diesem Spielprinzip nicht so perfekt angepasst sind und die daher eine unterlegene Rolle einnehmen, sind sie aber dennoch von fundamentaler Wichtigkeit für die soziale Reproduktion der virtuellen Welt.