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Introduction

World of Warcraft is considered the pinnacle of massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPGs, a genre of computer games that offer fictional universes where thousands of individuals play with or against each other or simply hang out to socialize. *World of Warcraft*, developed by Blizzard Entertainment based in Irvine, California, facilitates a wide range of play styles and preferences, ranging from casual role-playing to pursuing hardcore cooperative challenges. The game is considered easy to learn but hard to master, and is surrounded by a huge, player-driven culture offering everything from information wikis to fan fiction, from user-interface modifications to guides explaining how best to level up and even how to learn a profession or how to earn virtual gold through the in-game auction house.

Since its release in November 2004, *World of Warcraft* (WoW) has attracted a massive crowd of players, peaking at twelve million in 2010.¹ The expansion pack entitled *Cataclysm* released that year sold more than 3.3 million copies in the first 24 hours after release, making it the fastest-selling PC game of all time. Even though the game has since shed some of its vast user base, with around ten million players in early 2012 the game remains one of the most popular MMORPGs in the world. With its ongoing success, the game has become a poster child of the progressively collaborative relationship between consumers and producers observed in the larger media landscape. As media theorist Henry Jenkins notes, ‘game designers acknowledge that their craft has less to do with prestructured stories than with creating the preconditions for spontaneous community activities’ (2006: 159). According to *EDGE* magazine, one of several game industry sources that crowned *World of Warcraft* the ‘game of the decade’, the game is exemplary of a larger change in how we consume media ‘not as individual packages picked from the shelf, but as services, always evolving to meet the needs of their growing audience’ (2010: 68). To obtain this service, however, players need to pay a monthly subscription fee in addition to buying the game itself. These subscription fees provide Blizzard with the financial means to constantly update the game. A game like *World of Warcraft* is not a stable object but an object in flux; it is continuously transformed through patches and expansion packs that express what Blizzard thinks the player community wants next. Players themselves have created a vast network of websites, information databases, blogs, for-

ums and other communication channels through which they not only express their needs, wishes and other game-related expressions in words but also through fan art, videos, user-interface modifications and other creative productions.

The increasingly collaborative relationship between consumers and producers suggested above, however, is not free of conflict. As Jenkins points out, companies see participation as something they can 'start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market', while consumers on the other hand assert 'the right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish' (2006: 169). As a result, conflict can arise between producers and consumers but also between consumers themselves, when they are confronted with diverging interests in the very media object in which they participate. In these moments of conflict, the game itself – what it is (or should become) and how it should be played – is at stake.

Conflicts about *World of Warcraft* between players and Blizzard even started before the game was officially launched in late 2004. The following announcement surfaced and spread across the hacker community in January 2004, many months before the official launch:

Open-source proponents, crackers, and anarchists alike rejoice as an alpha version of *World of Warcraft* has allegedly been secured and is now supposedly making its way around warez circles. This news comes from Skull's Hack Site who says WarForge (infamous for their work in battle.net emulation for the War3 and TFT betas) is already working on server software for the WoW leak.²

This incident occurred when the game was still at a closed alpha testing phase, a period in which sparse publicity material, such as carefully chosen screenshots and videos, was available to prospective players. In order to control potential damage, a Blizzard employee was quick to react with a post on Blizzard's official forums:

In order to accelerate the testing process, we recently allowed a small group of external testers to play the game. During this process, a collection of files was leaked to the Internet. While these files contain alpha content from the game, they are not fully playable and therefore do not convey the experience that *World of Warcraft* will provide when it is released.

We are currently investigating this matter and will take serious action against those involved.

As always, we appreciate the interest and enthusiasm that players around the world have for *World of Warcraft*, and we look forward to delivering a massively multiplayer game unlike any you have ever experienced. Until then, we ask that

you refrain from sharing any content that doesn't come directly from Blizzard Entertainment (posted by "Katricea" on the battle.net forums, 7 January 2004).

Probably to the chagrin of Blizzard, the leaked *World of Warcraft* code nevertheless spread via peer-to-peer file-sharing networks. While it remained largely unplayable – the code was far from finished, and no servers were up supporting the code – *World of Warcraft* was suddenly pulled out of Blizzard's control sphere and thrust into the players' domain. The result was a proliferation of devious coding groups with mysterious names like WarForge, Team Phyton and WoWDaemon trying to emulate the game by, for instance, reverse engineering client software in order to set up private rather than Blizzard-controlled servers.

The hacking incident and its aftermath signal a larger phenomenon this book seeks to investigate: both players and Blizzard are stakeholders in *World of Warcraft* who engage in constant negotiations concerning control, agency and ownership over the game. During such negotiations, stakeholders employ different tactics on various levels of negotiation – technical, fictional, social, managerial and so forth – in order to gain and/or keep control, agency and ownership. In this book I organize these levels of negotiation in four main perspectives: game play, game design, game contract and game culture. The more of these perspectives are involved in negotiation processes, the more complex these processes become, and the higher the potential is for tension. In this book, these overlapping levels of negotiation are called *battlefields of negotiation*. From this layered approach follow the main questions this book poses: how and on what level do negotiations between stakeholders (including both players and the game's developer) take form; in what ways do these negotiations define, challenge and alter the process of play; and how do they effect and influence the game as a sociocultural object? Key to understanding the processes of negotiation taking place in and around *World of Warcraft* is the fact that there is no such thing as a definitive, fixed version of *World of Warcraft*; the game is constantly changing through use by its players and through maintenance and upgrading by its owners, and is therefore always evolving into something different.³

As explained, *World of Warcraft* is designed to be flexible and manipulatable, not just by Blizzard but also by players, to cater to all kinds of play styles and preferences. Why, then, would players choose to illicitly appropriate *World of Warcraft* – which happened with the *World of Warcraft* leak incident? The answer is that, in practice, *World of Warcraft* is tightly controlled by Blizzard, with both technical and contractual barriers limiting the amount of freedom that players have over the game. For the 'open-source proponents, crackers and anarchists' mentioned in the announcement about the file leak, *World of Warcraft* is the antithesis of what they are looking for in a game. For this group of stakeholders, getting access to the game's code, making it run and spreading it among peers was not (just) an act of piracy but also a way of claiming control, agency and ownership over the

game. For most players, the stakes as well as the tactics used to pursue them are not as excessive as those of the emulation community. But, as I will show throughout this book, players are nevertheless heavily invested in what they consider to be “their” game, even if their particular vision of *World of Warcraft* does not entirely comply with or even opposes the vision of other stakeholders.

The approach this book takes to investigate the complexity of *World of Warcraft* and its accompanying player community could be called a hybrid methodology. As a games researcher with a media studies background, I follow a humanities perspective to analyze *World of Warcraft* as a cultural media object with embedded rules and other design structures which bring with them certain affordances and limitations for use and play. Studying games from such a perspective, however, requires a researcher to play.⁴ As game scholar Espen Aarseth points out: ‘If we have not experienced the game personally, we are liable to commit severe misunderstandings, even if we study the mechanics and try our best to guess at their workings’ (2003: 3). In the same way that games need play to come into being, game researchers need to play in order to understand them. Taking this argument one step further is games researcher and sociologist T. L. Taylor, who argues that:

While looking at a game as it is presented as a boxed product may tell us something about the given structure of the artifact or its imagined player, understanding it as a live object – as a playful artifact – comes via an attention to the assemblage that constructs our actual games and play (Taylor 2009: 332).

This assemblage is not limited to technology (hardware, software), game design or game history but also includes the emergent practices of communities, the social dimensions of play, the institutional structures shaping the game and play, legal structures, our own material world and so on (ibid. 332).

To understand the game not just as a cultural artifact but as a live object or playful artifact, to study the ongoing negotiations between players – and between Blizzard and the players – and, more importantly, to understand what is at stake for these parties, I needed more than “just” play. To not just participate in but understand the community and their practices, wishes and needs, I went “native”, to borrow a term from anthropology; I actively participated in *World of Warcraft*’s community within and well beyond the borders of the game.⁵ I started playing *World of Warcraft* in April 2005, a few weeks after the European release of the game, played actively for many years and even though I have moved on to other games, I still find myself renewing my subscription from time to time. During this period, I have accumulated many hundreds, even thousands, of hours of play, spread between different characters. Even before the game was launched I read, monitored and participated in a range of different websites, information

databases and forums dedicated to the game, and I still keep an eye on them. In 2008, I visited a large player convention in Paris organized by Blizzard. Was this time spent in and around *World of Warcraft* dedicated research? No, but it did indirectly contribute to my overall experience and understanding of *World of Warcraft* in all its complexity.

Discovering and navigating the boundaries between play and research has been an important part of the gestation of this book. The risk of going native is always to lose critical distance, especially when considering that a researcher who considers him/herself a gamer – and I do – is already at least partly native. This does not need to be problematic. In the introduction to his seminal book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Jenkins states that when he writes about fan culture, he writes ‘both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community)’ (Jenkins 1992: 5). In many ways, the same applies to me and my work, with the notion of “fan” overlapping or replaced with that of “gamer”. The distinctive use of the term “gamer” over “player”, for example, is deliberate. As media scholar Bernard Perron pointed out, the label gamer is often used in the game industry to typify gaming fans: it delineates a certain activity and attitude towards the medium of games (Perron 2003: 242). It is a label I would not hesitate to apply to myself, having been an avid games enthusiast since my childhood. I am not an outsider to the world of games but actually an insider, a participant, a status that is as much a part of my writing as academic reflexive, critical distance. My dual position of being close to as well as distanced from the object of study can be considered highly beneficial to studying games like *World of Warcraft*.

Playing on a European *World of Warcraft* server and moving primarily among the English-speaking European and North American community of players on the websites around the game mean that my analysis of the game and its culture unavoidably represents only part of the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon as a whole. The game has a very strong presence in Asia – around half of all *World of Warcraft* players are found in China alone. Unfortunately, this part of the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon is beyond the scope of this book.⁶ This work does not claim to have investigated all of *World of Warcraft* but is the result of situated play and research. This makes any holistic statement about *World of Warcraft* by definition complicated, echoing media scholar Sybille Lammes’ argument that we should acknowledge the situatedness of games as culture because ‘the researched material is always rooted in the local or embodied space of a player/researcher and has no universal meaning as such’ (Lammes 2007: 28). The result is a certain inevitability of partiality and subjectivity. My aim is to use the many examples of situated play throughout this book as meaningful samples of the kind of negotiations that take place in and around the game.

To understand both *World of Warcraft* as well as the negotiation processes giving it shape, this book takes a step-by-step approach. In Part I of the book, which I call 'Framing the Game', I provide a framework that forms the theoretical underpinning of the research. This framework consists of the four aforementioned levels – game design, game play, game culture and game contract – each offering a different view on playing a game like *World of Warcraft*. In the game design section, I will focus on whether or not *World of Warcraft* in fact can be called a game at all. Here, I will also provide a historical overview of the MMORPG genre, resulting in a descriptive frame for *World of Warcraft*'s design choices. In the section on game play, I will approach play both ontologically (conceptualizing play as movement) and socially (constructing *World of Warcraft* among other things as an environment that facilitates devious, anti-social forms of play which I call individualized group play). The game culture section discusses *World of Warcraft* in terms of participatory culture, in which the notion of player control, agency and ownership in and over the game is approached critically. Strongly linked to these issues of control, agency and ownership is the final section on game contract, in which legal contracts as well as social etiquette and protocol are investigated. On and between these four levels, I argue, battlefields of negotiations transpire.

Part II of the book, titled 'Controlling the Game', provides an in-depth analysis of *World of Warcraft* as a designed object. Here, I explore how Blizzard exerts control over the player's behaviour through a series of affordances and limitations in the game's design, as well as how this control infuses the game – which as a MMORPG is inherently open-ended in terms of play options – with a sense of how the game should be played. Three levels of game design are investigated: the technological and configurational support structures that enable play; the rules of the game in terms of goals and dominant tactics to accomplish them; and the fictional world in which the player's characters exist during play. Design choices on all three levels present players with dominant play strategies, which in turn convey an intended use of the game. Deviation from this intended use, I argue, is a core element of the various negotiations between players, and between players and Blizzard.

Tactics of deviance are the main subject of Part III of the book, called 'Gaming the Game'. Here, three extended examples are presented in which players purposely go against or beyond the rules and boundaries of play. The questions asked here are whether and how deviant play strategies contribute to a transformative game experience, and whether deviance leads to increased agency and/or alternative, player-created forms of control. The three cases are based on individual play, individualized group play and dedicated group play practices, each showcasing deviance from another angle. All three case studies, however, show players engaging in practices in which they exercise external means originating from *World of Warcraft*'s surrounding participatory culture – including the use of strategy guides

and user-interface modifications – to stray from or transgress the intended use of the game.

Part IV, the final part of the book, named ‘Claiming the Game’, showcases three extended examples in which stakeholders accidentally and/or wilfully engage in negotiations in which the transgression of the boundaries of play is brought to a point where conflict erupts. The question here is, do Blizzard and players provide and construct forms of management (or self-management) to deal with these conflicts? The examples presented in this chapter are very different in form and content. One of them involves my own experiences as a victim of virtual crime and the subsequent negotiations taking place between Blizzard and myself, and discusses who is primarily involved in enforcing virtual law. The second one investigates the participatory practice of machinima filmmaking (animated films created through game engines). Here, *World of Warcraft*’s game engine is used to create films, some of which present controversial content, which are then distributed among the player community. The final example details a particular event during *World of Warcraft*’s evolution, the release of a content patch that caused severe community fragmentation and harassment between players. In all three cases, the contractual perspective plays a key role, as tensions between players and Blizzard are resolved through potential and actual exclusion from the game.

Each of these chapters adds a new layer of inquiry, which ultimately shows what it means to design and to play but also to study a game in which millions of users invest a large share of their leisure time, an investment that ultimately leads to the ongoing evolution of the game itself. In her article on the assemblage of play, Taylor refers to the work of new media scholar Seth Giddings who shows that ‘we are no longer looking at just a “technology” and its “users” but the event of their relationships, of their reciprocal configuration’ (Giddings 2006: 160; Taylor 2009). Battlefields of negotiation, I argue, are a key part of these processes of reciprocal configuration, which began well before *World of Warcraft* was released and which still continue now. As such, *World of Warcraft* was, is and will remain a phenomenon that results from perpetual negotiations between its various stakeholders.

Ultimately, by focusing on its various battlefields of negotiation, this book presents a way to expose the forces underlying control, agency and ownership in a game subject to perpetual metamorphosis. In doing so, it shows that these types of games, often thought of as among the most inviting of all participatory media, are certainly not free of power struggles but are rather defined by it.

