2007

A Short-Term Ethnographic Study of a Popular Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

Chad Miller
Youngstown State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr

A Short-Term Ethnographic Study of a Popular Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

Chad Miller
Youngstown State University

Virtual worlds provide a unique opportunity to study human behavior in a novel environment. Modern online video games place players in social situations with objectives that are unlike those found in the non-virtual world. For example, many traditionally scarce resources are unlimited in virtual worlds (food, animals, etc.); though, scarcity does still exist with respect to each player's time.

To acclimate myself to this culture, I asked my colleague, Josh, to let me observe his girlfriend and him while they played what is currently the most popular massively multiplayer online role playing game: World of Warcraft. In addition to observing, I had many opportunities to ask the players questions about their experiences, and I was also able to create a character myself. Some of the specifics mentioned in this paper will be altered when the expansion is released (it is due in late 2006), but the overall culture and norms should not be affected significantly.

i. Wednesday, February 22, 2006

I sat down at Josh's computer a somewhat experienced video game player. Having owned and played several game systems (Nintendo, Super Nintendo, Nintendo GameCube, and a computer), I had some familiarity with the types of games that can be made for traditional systems. I had played first-person shooters, like Doom, role-playing games, like Final

Fantasy, and adventure games, like The Legend of Zelda, so I felt comfortable with video games before playing World of Warcraft. What I learned, however, is that World of Warcraft is not simply a video game, and traditional video game experience could not have prepared me for what amounts to a virtual world.

To understand the game better, I was allowed to create my own character and begin playing World of Warcraft. I was able to assign my character a name (with the help of the random name generator, I was christened Ulshataar). I also was able to choose my race and class. World of Warcraft has two main sides: the Alliance (the "good guys") and the Horde (the "bad guys"). Races within the Alliance include Human, Dwarf, Night Elf, and Gnome. The Horde races are the Undead, Trolls, Tauren, Orcs, and after the expansion is released, the Blood Elves. Because Josh had an affinity for the Horde, I chose to become a Tauren, a larger species with cow-like features and a hairy, powerful body.

Within the Tauren race, I could choose either males or females, different hair/head styles, varied outfits, and more, making my avatar (the graphic representation of a player in a gaming environment) very customizable.

I enjoyed customizing Ulshataar, but my choice of class was the most important choice I made. Most classes are available to both the Horde and Alliance, with some limitations depending on race. I chose to become a Shaman, as Josh informed me that it was fairly middle-of-the-road—somewhere between classes that mainly battle (e.g., Warriors) and those that predominately use magic (e.g., Mages).

The class decision is important for many reasons. Class determines not only the types of quests you undertake and the types of items you can use, but also your role in large instance runs, one aspect of this game that sets it apart from standard video games.

Upon completion of my character profile, I entered the World of Warcraft. The game's setting has a mythical, middle-age fantasy feel, and the game has impressive graphics. The game is three dimensional, meaning that the player can see their character and other aspects of the world from any angle. I could run while watching myself from the front, back, or from an aerial view. I began in the Tauren homeland, Mulgore, and I was immediately given several tasks to complete. I was instructed to find some people in my village to speak to, and, as I walked around, I was impressed by the size of this game's world. Almost every element within view was approachable. The mountains, lakes, huts, etc. in the background were all elements of the game. In many games, the background is just a decoration and the playable area is much smaller; in World of Warcraft, there was no

distinction, as the background was the world.

I learned of more tasks by talking with people in my village. My mission was to bring back a certain number of skins from animals near the capital (Thunderbluff). During this task I encountered my first enemies: Plain Striders. At first I was surprised that they just walked by me without attacking. Josh explained that they could not get aggro on me (i.e., target me or engage me in battle) until I attacked them, because I was at such a low level and they were not set to do that. My first World of Warcraft attack spell was unsuccessful. Undaunted, I approached my second Plain Strider. This time I got closer and was able to score a hit, but then the creature ran towards me, and I had not yet figured out how do use my mace. Josh called out commands as I flailed about the enemy, accidentally zooming and panning the view wildly. I finally got the hang of it and successfully slew the Plain Strider.

This battle marked my first break from realism within the game. When I stalked the Plain Strider, I felt as if I was watching a scene from a movie. When I attacked, however, a very strange thing happened; instead of bleeding or reeling after the first blow, the Plain Strider simply emitted a two-digit number that floated upwards and dissipated. This, I learned, was the amount by which the enemy's health just dropped. After the Plain Strider rushed me and attacked, our battle was nothing but my avatar swinging a weapon at the air and the Plain Strider pawing without ever visually touching my character. I later learned that scenes like this rarely look real, as characters do not take up physical space within the game. If they did, the towns, which may contain hundreds of players at a time, would become too congested. The result of this necessary aspect of the game design is, unfortunately, a very unrealistic battling interface wherein characters rush one another and, instead of visually fighting, simply trade damage.

The battle was not won easily, and I was proud of my accomplishment. I started to look for Ulshataar's next victim when Josh stopped me and told me that I still needed to search the carcass. That did not appeal to me, but, after finding one of the animal skins I was looking for, I found the process more amenable. Ulshataar overcame several other Plain Striders, collected the requisite number of skins, and returned to Camp Narache.

Upon delivering my skins, I received two things that seem very important to the game: more tasks and experience points. Receiving more tasks after completing one is common in this game. In fact, there are often many tasks/quests that a player may choose to undertake at any given time. While I was playing, there seemed to be an endless line of missions,

but I began to realize that this is what would make someone want to keep playing. There was no downtime in the game as there was always something more to do.

I also received experience points. Players receive these points from many things in the game: killing enemies, completing tasks or quests, and discovering new areas. Players accumulate experience points in order to "level up". With higher levels come more abilities, more weapons, and more game content.

The highest level in the game is currently 60, and reaching this is no small feat. It took Josh about three and a half weeks to "ding" (slang used to denote reaching a level) 60 with his first character. Three and a half weeks may seem not so long, until one considers that these three and a half weeks were all game time. This means that Josh spent 3.5 weeks, or 24.5 days, or 588 hours actually playing the game to reach level 60. He did this during the past summer. If we assume that the summer is 98 days long and that Josh only slept seven hours a day, he had 1,666 waking hours this past summer, and he spent roughly 35% of that playing World of Warcraft.

As a novice gamer, I have played long games. The longest game that I have completed was about 100 hours long. What I have noticed while playing these longer games is that, during the last quarter of the game, there are few novel events. Everything in the game usually succumbs to repetition and becomes less interesting. Though aspects of World of Warcraft do become repetitive, parts of the game are not unlocked or available until level 40, 50, 60, or beyond. This high-end content is one aspect of World of Warcraft that separates it from many games that I am used to, and it keeps many people playing the game, for many hours.

"Many people" may be an understatement; at the time of this observation, there are over six million people playing World of Warcraft. There are more than 100 countries in the world that do not have a population this high.

This is the other factor that separates World of Warcraft from conventional video games. These players interact, work together, form guilds, make friends, get married, and perform a slew of other social interactions all through the interface of this game. It is not surprising that, with players constantly encountering one another and being forced to work together, certain cultural norms and regulations would begin to develop. This population is ripe for ethnographical study, especially since this game elicits real human social behavior in surreal environments that have not yet been studied, as they do not exist anywhere in the world. For example, this

world has unlimited resources, no class structure, and many fixed and understood rules along with many social norms not yet solidified.

For these reasons, I look forward to studying this culture, but not until I get the head of Chief Sharptusk Thornmantle to a man back in Camp Narache; I am trying to ding level six tonight.

ii. Tuesday, March 14, 2006

After playing WoW (World of Warcraft), I still had many questions, so I decided to schedule an interview and observation session with Josh and his girlfriend, Andi, during our university's spring break.

When I think of college kids on spring break, images of inebriated students flocking to costal hotspots for a week of revelry come to mind. For gamers, however, paradise can be a hotel room, assuming it has internet access.

Josh said that he felt like a hacker carrying two desktop computers (his and Andi's) into the cheap hotel room located about 10 minutes from his dormatory. Hacking, however, could not have been further from couple's minds, as they were both intently playing WoW when I arrived at the hotel. After ensuring that my questions would not be an interruption, I began to watch Josh play.

General Game Information

I first asked about the structure of the game network. Blizzard is the company that created and maintains this game. Players purchase the game software for about $35, and then have to pay a $15 per month subscription fee to play online. Regular (non-online) games usually cost between $20 and $50, so the software fee is standard. The $15 per month pays for upkeep of servers. Blizzard maintains many different servers that allow players from all over the world to access the online component of WoW. Each server is given a name (the two Josh has played on are Icecrown and Dark Iron), and any character a player creates can only exist on one server. Blizzard is currently servicing America, Oceana, China, Korea, and Europe, making it the largest online game of its kind.

And what kind of game is WoW? It is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). The second element mentioned in that title is more familiar to me; the essential features of a role playing game include playing the game through an avatar and getting better as you progress. The avatar one plays through can be anything from a dragon to Mario, and "getting better" can involve gaining new abilities/skills or more characters and usually is tracked by something like experience points.

Brief History of Online Games

The first element of the MMORPG title is what makes this game very different, but it is not the first of its kind. The first big Massively Multiplayer Online game (MMO) was Ultima Online, but a limitation of this game was that players had to watch their avatars from a ¾ view, so everything in this game-world was experienced from a fixed, semi-aerial angle. The next two big MMO games were Everquest and Anarchy Online (AO). Everquest was a fully three dimensional fantasy role playing game, and it really defined the market in which WoW now operates. The three dimensional element adds greater depth and detail to the world, which gives the game a broader appeal. Anarchy Online was different from Everquest, as it had a futuristic setting rather than a fantasy one, but there were many similarities in terms of game design. WoW followed these games and has been successful for many reasons, some of which are the very immersive and impressive three-dimensional graphics and corrections to problems of the earlier MMOs. These explanations were all related to me by Josh, who wished for it be noted that he is not an expert on these game histories.

One thing these games all have in common, but that is lacking from most standard video games (and even many online games), is a persistent world. The world in WoW exists and is active even when a given player is not online and playing the game. This is very different from most games, in which the world is active only when a player is in it. When I stop playing The Legend of Zelda (a traditional, non-MMO game), I save my game, turn off the system, and the world stops until I return. The persistent MMO world may add to the desire at times to continue playing, as a player may not want to miss out on the action going on in the world or he/she may have an appointment with their guild at a specific time.

Classes and Talents

Josh had been playing as his Horde Discipline priest during my time at the hotel. Discipline refers to the specific talent he has chosen to focus on, and the decisions to specialize talents start when a player reaches level 10. There are three priest talents: Holy, Discipline, and Shadow, and each class has the ability to specialize in particular talents.

Talents and class will determine how a character functions within World of Warcraft. Some characters are more able to "go it alone", like Warriors, while others will be more successful in groups, like some priests, and there are many dimensions like this on which various classes and tal-

ents can be compared. For example, Josh's priest works better in a group, whereas rogues are good at soloing (playing without a group) and farming. (Farming is killing mobs to acquire specific items. Mobs and Non-player characters [NPCs] are characters in the game that are not avatars of players, but are instead controlled by the game's artificial intelligence. Though they are both non-player characters, "Mob" generally refers to enemies, while "NPCs" are generally allies.)

Guilds

Though much group work takes place after a player reaches level 60, one does not have to wait for this milestone to begin exploring the social side of this game. One of the most salient social features of World of Warcraft is the division of players into guilds. Guilds are created and maintained by players, generally having a website that houses all the registration procedures, points earned, etc. Though joining a guild is voluntary, much of the social side of WoW takes place in guilds, and they are usually the more effective way to earn the high-end items many players seek. Josh's guild is Tainted, and Andi's is Panda Attack.

In addition to helping a player get high-end items, guilds also help teach players many other aspects of the game. Josh feels that the difference between a good and bad guild depends on the level and focus of the player. He was lucky to find a first guild (Twist of Fate) that was focused on helping lower level players while maintaining a familial atmosphere. Josh felt like the members were playing for the fun of it. The other side of this spectrum is a guild that focuses mainly on high-end acquisition. These high-end oriented guilds become valuable once a player is ready to work for those rare items, because the high-end instances are difficult and knowing your partners helps a lot. Groups that attempt to work together that are not from a guild are called Pick-Up-Groups (PUGs), and this name generally carries a negative connotation, as these tend not to be as effective.

Players may choose to leave one guild for another once their current guild no longer satisfies their needs (though it should be noted that some guilds have subdivisions within them that focus on different areas, allowing for different specializations within the same guild). From what I observed, it seems as if leaving a guild generally has few, if any, social consequences in the game (unless a player is forced out). Changing guilds seems to happen relatively frequently, which is most likely why it is socially acceptable.

Being guilded also generally allows players working together to

"voice chat" (use vocal communication) through either Teamspeak or Vent, the two most popular voice programs used by guilds in the game. Voice chat is not a feature of the game and must be purchased and maintained by each guild. Though players can always communicate through typing (with the exception of Horde and Alliance characters, which cannot communicate—their words scramble to become nonsense), voice chatting is more effective in many cases, which gives an advantage to the guilds that use it. Other advantages of guilds are the collective knowledge about the game and banks which some guilds create that can distribute items to members of the guild who need them.

There are several ways to get into a guild. The easiest way is to be invited, and this usually happens to those who know someone in a guild or who impressed a guild member. Otherwise, players must apply to join a guild, and this process can be lengthy, with some guilds requiring several recruitment phases and group work before accepting a player. Players may also be recruited into a guild, but guilds that recruit, especially lower level players, are not usually considered very desirable. Josh recommended that players start looking to join a guild or be recruited while their level is in the teens, though some of the better guilds only let level 20 characters or above join, and raiding guilds typically only permit level 60s.

The minimum requirements to remain in a guild vary, with some requiring a given number of hours or group runs a week. If a player meets the minimum standards consistently, it is difficult to be forced out of a group unless he or she does something very socially undesirable (and what this might be varies from guild to guild as well).

An example of a very socially undesirable action is "ninja-ing" an item. Josh first heard this term in Anarchy Online, and it refers to a player in a group taking an item that a boss dropped when that player did not deserve it. This social taboo illustrates one of the most interesting aspects of online games. WoW is structured to require that the very best items only come from very large bosses (enemies that players fight at the end of a phase, level, or instance) that take many players working together to kill. The problem arises when it comes time to distribute the one or two items the boss dropped among the 40 people who just contributed to killing the boss.

Bosses are usually found in an instance, which is a special game-world separate from the general world in which players exist. An instance is a separate world created for only a set group of players, so that many different groups can play them at once. Each instance has a maximum number of player that can play at a time—5, 10, 20 or 40—and the enemies (all Mobs) that the party encounters are set to be challenging for that number

of players. When I was killing the Plain Strider by Thunderbluff, other players could have tried to kill the same one, because I was in the general WoW world. When a group enters an instance, a new world is created for them, and any other groups entering the instance will have a separate world for themselves as well. This serves several purposes, including giving players unlimited accessibility to instances and allowing the game to limit the number of players in any given instance.

The larger the group that is required by an instance, the better items the bosses will drop. To ensure equitable distribution of items, guilds developed a point rewards system. This is important because, when a player picks up a valuable weapon, it binds to that player and cannot be traded or given away. If a player takes a weapon that he or she should not have taken, this action cannot be undone, and this is why ninja-ing is such a taboo.

The point rewards system used by guilds usually involves Dragon Kill Points (DKP; this name comes from a former game). Guild members accumulate DKP for certain group actions. For example, participating in a 40-person instance will earn DKP for a player, because the guild needs many people to play these "raids" (group instances involving more than five players), though each individual will not benefit directly by getting a rare item every run. When an item drops, each player can "roll", or bid, on it. In smaller raids, DKP is usually not used to determine who gets the items that are dropped. In 20- or 40-man raids, however, items are awarded to players who have the highest accumulated DKP and who ask for the item. If a player is awarded an item (even if they were uncontested), an amount of DKP is subtracted from their total equal to the value of that item (determined by rareness, usefulness, etc.). For example, if a player has 17 DKP and wins a 40 DKP item, the player's DKP will drop to -23 DKP and the player will generally not be able to roll on another item until he or she has reached positive DKP again. In addition to the item winner losing 40 DKP, each member who participated in the raid would receive 1 DKP (a 40 DKP item divided by 40 players equals 1 DKP per player).

The DKP totals of all guild members are tracked on the guild website and are on file with the raid leader. The above is an example of a basic system, and these systems vary from guild to guild. What impressed me most was how carefully guilds monitor their member's DKP, and how many rules there are concerning them. Considering, however, that one of the main purposes of a guild at the high-end is to acquire rare and powerful items, a fair and accurate DKP system may be the most important aspect of a guild's survival.

Other Taboos

Besides ninja-ing, two other, less serious, social taboos have developed in online gaming. Ganking refers to killing another player when there is no reward for it. In WoW, players can choose to play on a PvP (player versus player) server or a normal server. On a normal server, players can only kill one another in specific areas, but on a PvP server, players can attack another player at almost any time. Josh described PvP servers as "WoW on hard mode" because of the increased difficulty due to unexpected player attacks. In some cases, it behooves one player to kill another, but ganking, with its negative connotation, refers to one player (usually of a higher level) killing another player just to aggravate them.

Corpse-camping is the extreme form of ganking. When a player in WoW is killed, he or she resurrects within the general area of his or her death. If the aggressor waits in the area, the victim will resurrect with ½ health, and can be killed again. This is considered so unappealing that many players will come to help if the victim calls for it.

Game Milestones

In addition to specializing (level 10) and joining a guild (level 10-20), there are several other milestones a player reaches while maturing a character. At level 40, the player gets a mount, which is a creature to ride that makes avatars move through the world faster. The next big milestone is dinging 60, which opens up entirely new areas in the gameworld and offers the opportunity for high-end raiding. After level 60, milestones have to do with sets of items (each player has armor, weapons, etc, which make up a set) that a player can collect. There is a "set zero", "set one" (all "purple" items) and "set two" (a set of better "purples"). Items are classified by a color system. Blue items are available when a player reaches experience levels in the high teens or low to mid twenties. Purples are called "epics", and they are usually available only to level 60 players running 40-man instances. The level above this, orange items called legendaries, will rarely drop from the end boss of a high-end 40-man raid, and are usually built from a series of items that drop off of raiding bosses and difficult to acquire tradeskill materials. Legendaries may also require an additional world or instance event to be finalized.

Newbs

Newb (short for "newbie") refers to either players brand new to the

game, like me, or to players who are not good at the game. Calling a player a newb in the latter sense is derogatory. Newb always refers to the player, not the character. If a player already rolled a 60 and then start another character, they are not a newb even when their character is level one.

How does a player mature from the position of newb? Josh said that there are two necessary things to learn: the jargon and the basic strategy of the game. I have been writing with as much jargon as I can because it is so important to the game's culture. Because so much communication is typed, players tend to abbreviate everything, including jargon, which makes learning it even more difficult. A mature player can spot a newb very quickly if he or she does not use proper words. Guilds can help a player learn the slang if they have not already grasped most of it by the time they join. I found it interesting that many of these terms had originated in older MMO games and have found their way into WoW since then.

The second step to becoming a mature player is learning the basic strategy of the game. To Josh, this means learning how to kill a mob without dying, and this usually requires an appropriate use of a character's special abilities. I found learning the appropriate spells and attacks a bit difficult, and I only had a few at my low level. When characters are in their teens, they have a lot more to think about and many more types of enemies to fight. Part of maturity in the game involves knowing how to kill a given mob, but knowing if your character should be able to kill a mob is easy, as they are labeled with a level of difficulty that matches a character's experience levels. The only exceptions are mob elites, which are usually found in instances and require about five people at the listed level to kill (e.g., a level 25 elite mob will take five level 25 characters to kill).

Introduction to Party Fighting

When a party runs an instance, they have to make sure that they not only have all the given classes and talents necessary, but that those individuals know their niche while fighting enemy mobs. The general strategy is to have the warriors (a class with the strongest defense because it can wear mail or plate armor) attack an enemy first so that it can get and keep "aggro" while the rest of the party performs their functions. Aggro refers to the process by which a mob chooses when and whom to attack. For example, the Plain Striders did not get aggro on me until I attacked them. When a group attacks, the goal is to have a strong character with armor get aggro and keep it so that the enemy does not attack party members with less defense. Warriors are equipped with several means by which to do this, including a special ability called taunt which builds aggro

against the warrior. The amount of aggro an enemy assigns to each player is determined by a formula that considers which player struck first, who is the most dangerous, etc., and the enemy will attack the player who has the most aggro built against it.

The reason that warriors must hold aggro is to keep the attention of the enemy off of the "cloth" characters, or characters without armor that wear mostly cloth, like priests, mages, and warlocks. Cloth characters are most effective when casting spells from a distance, whether these are spells intended to damage the enemy (nukes) or spells used for "crowd control". When cloth characters participate in crowd control, they are using their abilities to incapacitate the less powerful enemies while the strong attackers in the party fight the large enemy. This is a very basic strategy, and players must adapt their strategy to every different boss and circumstance.

Besides the general instances, there are also special PvP instances, and they all pit the Alliance against the Horde. The three battlegrounds are Warsong Gultch (max of ten players on each side, a capture-the-flag style game), Arathi Basin (max of 15 players on each side, a king-of-the-hill style game), and Alterac Valley (max of 40 players on each side, a defeat-the-opponent's-general game).

iii. Thursday, March 16, 2006

During my final session with Josh and Andi, I was invited to observe my first 40-man raid, and, as I arrived, the party was "res-ing" (resurrecting everyone after being defeated by an enemy). Many of the group members in this raid were new to this instance, including Gorefast, their raid leader. Gorefast was the main warrior, and served as the "tank" (warriors get aggro and have to withstand a lot of damage, so they are dubbed "tanks" when instance-running). The tank does not always lead raids, but they tend to be dominant in the group.

Shamans have the ability to resurrect themselves. Therefore, it falls to them to res other characters that can res the whole group. After regrouping, everyone drank potions and ate to refill their mana and health before making another attempt.

Priests are helpful in this resurrection process, but their main job is to keep the tank alive. Other cloth characters that deal greater damage per second (DPS) will use their magic for attacking (these include mage, rogues, and warlocks).

After discussing it, the group decided that the battle did not go well because everyone was too spread out, so they regrouped and strategized. There are spaces in instances for groups to do this type of strategizing,

and, though there is usually an enemy in the background, no mobs will get aggro on the party in these spaces. They were attempting to kill Gehennas, one of several bosses in the Molten Core. Gehennas has two guards surrounding him, so the strategy upon which the guild decided was to kill the guards first and then attack the main mob.

The second attempt was successful, and cheers erupted though Andi's speakers. The team was using Vent, which allowed them to speak verbally to one another. The cheering quickly become warnings for everyone to get their reses up because the nearby enemies would be respawning quickly.

Gehennas dropped the Gloves of Prophecy and a Warrior Ring, two epic (purple) items. Items are usually restricted in their usability, and one class will generally benefit most from an item. As these were a priest's item, Andi and another priest rolled for them. The gloves went to the other priest, who had more DKP.

Though this narrative may make it seem like these items were easily won, it has taken two hours to finally get to and kill this boss. I missed much of this buildup as I arrived only at the boss, but even preparing for the second attempt took about 15 minutes. This planning is necessary because, though death in WoW is never permanent, dying does damage a character's items and will end up forcing players to spend more money on upkeep after the instance. For a tank, this type of run may cost 10 or more gold.

According to Josh, the value of WoW gold can be understood as an exchange rate of 100 gold is being equivalent to about $10. I then reasoned that 10 gold (one dollar) was not that high a cost at all, but Josh further explained that gold is actually very time consuming to acquire. It may take a few hours to acquire the 10 gold necessary to repair all a warrior's equipment. To circumvent this, some people actually sell gold on E-Bay, an online auction site, and 100 gold tends to sell for about $10.

The players who generate gold with the intent to sell it to other players are called Gold Farmers, and many of them are from China. Ten American dollars in China are fairly valuable, and Gold Farmers can make a living in this way while working from home. Unfortunately, this job is not very fun. Even though they are playing a game, it is imperative that Gold Farmers acquire as much gold as they can in as short a time as possible if they are to be competitive in this market. This usually means that they will be repeating the same activities for many hours. This practice does not hurt the game's economy, as many prices are set by the market, which will change as more money floods into it. In the past, Blizzard, in an attempt to discourage farming, banned many farmer accounts and deleted

thousands of gold from servers, causing prices to skyrocket briefly. WoW has an economy that can experience inflation and even spill out into the real world economy, with real currency equivalents for gold in the game. We have come a long way since Pong.

As the Panda Attack 40-man group worked their way to the next boss, Josh explained that everyone in this group is hoping to get an epic. Since the group contains at least one of every class, someone is likely to be able to use anything that drops, and those classes with the fewest players the raid party will always have the greatest chances of getting the epic. In the case of priests, Andi's class, there should be about four in a 40-man instance, and in this group there were five.

After about an hour of working though the Molten Core, the next boss, Garr, loomed in the distance. Garr was a creature made of molten rocks and surrounded by six smaller versions of himself, called firesworn. The raid leader was planning the attack as Andi and the group waited. As they were waited, Andi asked Josh if a tank from his guild, who was familiar with this boss, could tell them what to do, but Josh said that Panda Attack would never give him their Vent password, and he could not organize the attack without voice communication. High levels of communication are one reason that guilds work best in a high-end instance like this; the other is that each player needs to trust all the others to be successful.

After about 20 minutes, the party had still not attacked Garr. The leader sent out a ready check to all members, but, when they did not all respond, the attack was held off for longer. One group member had typed "Afk for drink", which means "Away from keyboard for a drink". Everyone waited.

The strategy that the group devised had to account for the fact that, if the firesworn died before Garr did, Garr would get very strong. The warlocks were each assigned to "banish" a firesworn, which should incapacitate but not kill them during the battle. During the next ready check Andi's connection died, so she let everyone know through Vent that she would be back shortly. Had she not reported the loss of her connection, her party may not have known about her disconnection, as an avatar will remain in the game for a couple minutes, even if the connection is dropped. This mechanism is designed to prevent players from having the ability to leave the game for strategic reasons (e.g., they are being attacked and cannot defend themselves)

Once Andi was back, the ready check went through successfully and the party attacked. Though I was not very familiar with large raids, I could tell that it was not going well. Group members were yelling, "No healing on...", which meant that some group member needed to be healed.

With only four warlocks, the group could not control all eight firesworn, and the raid party was "wiped" (completely killed).

The team leader asked, "Does everyone understand what went wrong?" He went on to explain that no one stayed on their targets and that the hunters needed to be closer to their targets while moving in. A small dispute started about when the mob's aggro was pulled and by whom, and the leader responded with, "Hey everyone, this is a tough fight, so don't get down just 'cause I'm pointing out things. It's all part of the learning process."

After this, all the group members started to chime in and agreed that this was a tough fight and that positioning was important, etc. This kind of cooperation is necessary if the team is to work together successfully. Josh said that it is rare to kill a boss like this on your guild's first attempt; a party usually wipes first. As the group was resetting for the next attempt, I asked Andi a question and she did not respond. She was intently focused even on this setup, which to me seemed like downtime.

Josh explained that, though getting to bosses is time consuming and setting up for bosses is time consuming, resetting after a wipe is the most time consuming. This is because some member will generally leave after a wipe, and the group must wait to replace them. In addition, other members will go afk for bio (take a "biological" break, like urinating or defecating) or other reasons.

Andi's group decided that the original strategy was good, but that things just happened too quickly. They were wiped again after their second attempt, and the moods of the members were very negative. Josh assumed that that this second wipe would be the last round for tonight.

Meanwhile, Josh was traveling from one end of Azeroth (the WoW world) to the other to participate in a 15-man raid. To get there, he had had to jump on a windrider (part of the mass transportation in the world), catch a blimp, and connect to several other flying windriders before his destination. This trip took about 20 minutes in total. Besides being instantly transported by warlocks and mages, there are few warps in the game. Josh sees this in a positive light, as it forces players to commit to where they are going. From my perspective, it seems like there are many times in the game where the player must simply sit and wait for something to happen.

As Josh was flying, he passed a capital city in which Onyxia's head was on a pike. Onyxia was originally a very difficult boss in the game, and when a Horde guild defeated her, her head appeared for a short time on the pike in one of their capital towns.

The game's geography includes capital cities for each race and then

two very big cities that serve as the capital for the Horde and Alliance. These major capitals are heavily guarded, with many 60-elite NPCs and many players as well. Though there is little in-game reward for doing so, some guilds seek to kill the king or queen of the opposite side. This is a monumental task, requiring several hours and possibly 100 or more players working together. Once an attack like this begins, many players from the defending side will come to the capital for aid, which is why the offensive side needs so many players. Josh said that he would gladly leave an instance to defend the Horde Queen, because having her killed while one is online is like letting down a player's entire country.

Many guilds that undertake these or similar tasks may make videos of their fights, and many of these are available online. These videos are usually set to music, and they tend to be impressive due the "camera" angles and effects possible with the three dimensional view. Guilds often will make these videos to help recruit members, and the videos can help prospective members understand what the core values of a given guild are. About a half-hour later (it was now past 1:00 am), Andi's party had geared up for another attack on Garr. Josh was surprised, especially since some tired members dropped out. Though they had less than 40 people, they went in anyway, which put them at a significant disadvantage.

While the battle ensued, I was excited to see that all the tanks were alive and doing well. The voices speaking over Vent were much calmer now, and they were giving commands to have injured players step out and bandage themselves (which seemed like a good thing). The other ensuing statements seemed similarly encouraging.

I watched as Garr dropped to 89% health. Then 66% and 39%. While Garr was dying, everyone in the guild seemed stable, with Andi's tank not even taking damage (only the main tank was). When Garr was at 5%, commands not to celebrate yet issued forth from the main tank. There were still six more firesworn to kill, but this was much closer than they had come to killing Garr before, and it was hard for the members to hide their excitement.

As the guild killed the firesworn, commands for the melee (DPS) characters to get out of range were given, and only tanks were allowed to remain close to the enemies. This is to protect the team from the final explosions of each of the firesworn, which can seriously damage players without strong armor. Despite this order, many members of the party rushed the final firesworn in order to be propelled into the air as it exploded in a show of victory. Everyone cheered and congratulated one another after the final firesworn died, and the process of distribution began again. Their mission was accomplished, and they would retire to sleep victorious.

This was only a small glimpse of what happens all over the world, frequently, every day. Elation and devastation, friendships and betrayal, marriages and funeral processions, all in the name of WoW and the social bonds formed therein.

But is this world so different from ours? The differences elicit some interesting behaviors, but the human tendencies for cooperation and hate (of a different group), desire for status, creation of legends, etc. all have referents in our quotidian existence. These similarities have led some gamers (my key informant included) to argue that, as gaming instruments and worlds increase in their realism, they have increasing potential to supplement—and possibly supplant—our social, economic, and, of course, recreational world. If all the world's a stage, and we are merely players, should it matter whether our stage is the physical earth or virtual data? To what extent this virtualization will happen, one can only speculate, however, my experience with WoW has shown me that the potential of virtual worlds is great, and this encroachment of the virtual may be more plausible than I previously imagined.

Presently, still far from this virtual world, I have matters in the physical world to which I must attend.

Afk for drink.