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'You're Doing It Wrong':

How Paratexts, Online Communities, and User Innovation Shape Development and
Culture in *World of Warcraft*

by

Brendan Crosby

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE
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Abstract

Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games (MMOs) occupy a curious position at the crossroads of culture and technology. While users are free to immerse themselves in virtual worlds, they remain largely removed from the formal systems of administration and development governing these realms. Yet, despite their lack of direct influence, users have managed to influence MMO games in profound ways. This is particularly true of the popular game *World of Warcraft* (WoW), which serves as the focus of this study. Based on evidence gathered from interviews with average WoW users and the theories of Rene Glas and Eric von Hippel on stakeholder theory and user-driven innovation respectively, I argue that users have enhanced their own agency and precipitated the introduction of novel gameplay elements and innovative techniques through the utilization of user-created resources called paratexts and the formation of unique online communities.

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad, I told you I had a plan.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Dedication	iv
Table of Contents	v
Commonly Used Terms	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Why Wow?	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	9
2.1 Social	10
2.2 Gameplay	18
2.3 Development	27
Chapter 3: Methodology	39
3.1 Data Collection and Methods	39
3.2 Interview Guide	40
3.3 Recruitment	41
3.4 Participants	41
3.5 Data Storage and Analysis	42
3.6 Common Terms in the Study	43
Chapter 4: Data	46
4.1 The Participants	47
4.2 Balance, Development, and User-Input	51
4.3 The Exclusivity of Endgame Content and Communities	56
4.4 The Role of Paratexts	63
4.4.1 Add-ons	68
4.5 Diluting the Game	70
Chapter 5: Analysis	77
5.1 Virtual Spaces Constitute Unique Innovation Communities	79
5.2 The Divergence of Interests Between Advanced Players and Developers	83
5.3 The Necessity and Innovative Capacity of Paratext Culture	86
5.4 Community Involvement Can Have a Positive Impact on User Innovation ..	90
Chapter 6: Conclusion	97
6.1 The Power of Paratexts	97
6.2 Changing the Face of the Game	99
6.3 Who's in Control?	100
6.4 Future Work	102
6.5 User Innovation in MMO Games	103
Interview Guide	106
References	108

Commonly Used Terms

<u>Term</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Add-on	A user-created program that modifies the user interface of the game.
Dungeon	Areas within the game that require 5 players to co-operate as a team to complete.
Guild	Semi-permanent in-game community composed of multiple players.
MMO	Abbreviation of Massively Multiplayer Online Game.
Paratext	Any kind of user-created resource, product, video, or program.
Progression	The newest and most challenging game content available as released by the developer.
PvE	Abbreviation of Player versus Environment.
PvP	Abbreviation of Player versus Player.
Raid	The most challenging in-game areas requiring large teams of 10 or more players to complete.
Theorycraft	The practice of maximizing a character's abilities through the calculation of game statistics.
Twinking	Alternative style of play wherein a user voluntarily stunts the development of their own character.
UI	Abbreviation of User Interface, the display from which a user controls their avatar.
Wiki	An online article that can be accessed, read, and modified by users.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Games have long been a captivating area of study, the theoretical and cultural underpinnings of which having been subject to rigorous academic debate. While Johann Huizinga once posited that games take place within a “magic circle” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 11) of sorts, removed from the influence of peripheral factors, this position has become increasingly complicated given the complexity and interdependence of contemporary games. This is particularly true when looking to online multiplayer games such as MMOs. Located at a nexus of technology, culture, and digital labor, MMO games represent the future of not only gaming, but the creation and population of online spaces and communities.

Since their inception in the early 1990’s, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (abbreviated as MMOs) have gained widespread popularity and subscribership. Unique in their design, MMOs encompass enormous, persistent virtual worlds which users populate, socialize in, and often invest numerous hours partaking in virtual exploits (as of 2005 the average MMO user spent 21 hours per week online (Yee, 2005)). Unlike other genres of online games the digital environments of MMOs continue to exist even after users log off, as such they are consistent, ever-present virtual realms and places of congregation. This distinction has led scholars to label them as “3rd places” (Steinkueler & Williams, 2006), social institutions (Ratan, Chung, & Shen, 2010), even arenas of virtual economy (Castronova, 2007), and indeed MMOs do encapsulate all of these characteristics in profound ways. However MMOs also introduce unexplored new terrain with regard

to development and innovation studies, more specifically user-driven innovation and ownership.

By and large, MMOs present users with highly complex and richly detailed virtual environments through which they encourage social interaction, leisurely entertainment, and escapism. However much of this engagement is strictly prescribed and governed by the rules of the developer. Users can perform a limited set of actions, can only enter clearly marked virtual zones, and may even be reprimanded or banned if their online speech is deemed offensive (Glas, 2010). Users are not typically permitted to directly alter the code of the game, nor is it common for them to set up servers independent of the developer. In this way they differ markedly from online games which give users free access to manipulate or “mod” the game as they see fit, a notable example being the wildly successful Half-Life franchise (Neiborg & Graaf, 2008). Indeed MMOs release users into a veritable online Garden of Eden, lush in imagined possibilities and superficial interactivity while barring them from the underlying mechanics and structures which would facilitate any true appropriation of the technology.

Yet despite this lack of direct agency, users have still managed to impact the game in distinct and novel ways. Users have developed specialized tools to interface with the game, cultivated explicit bodies of knowledge and even fostered distinct communities which have allowed them to assert some degree of innovation. To borrow a term from Rene Glas, users are claiming ownership over the game in spite of their inability to directly influence its development. This is manifested both through the occurrence of deviant playing strategies (Glas, 2010) but also through

the official adoption of user made functions or “add-ons” (Prax, 2012). The pressing question thus becomes how does one account for the innovation of an essentially static product and the influence of users on a technology over which they essentially possess no control, stake, or developmental involvement?

1.1 Why Wow?

To address this question I look specifically at the game *World of Warcraft* (WoW), a massively popular game often regarded as a benchmark for modern MMOs. While WoW may appear to be a static and unalterable product, its rigidity has resulted in users innovating in novel and unique ways. To influence development and assert ownership over the game, users have organized into unique online innovation communities which focus on the creation of unofficial resources, strategies, and programs capable of altering the game on an aesthetic level. Collectively these are called “paratexts” (Glas, 2010), and their cumulative impact has allowed users to innovate a product which they essentially have no direct control over. This study looks at the existing state of user-driven innovation in the game of WoW, delving into the experiences and practices of average game users through a series of qualitative interviews and uncovering the processes through which users assert their own perceived and real agency over the game. In doing so, it examines the opportunities and limitations of WoW spaces as unique innovation communities, illustrates the divergence of interests between advanced users and developers, uncovers some of the mechanisms behind the creation of paratexts and their sizeable contribution to the appeal of the game, and lastly broaches the issue of community involvement and its positive impacts on user innovation in the game.

Launched in November of 2004 (Blizzard, 2012), *World of Warcraft* has become representative of the MMO genre due in large part to its enormous commercial success and popularity. Boasting approximately 12 million subscriptions at its peak (Glas, 2010), *World of Warcraft* has a population that rivals that of many small countries, not to mention a thriving virtual economy (Castronova, 2007). This enormous player base has allowed the game to grow into what is possibly the most widely recognized MMO to date, catapulting the genre from the fringes of technology and nerd culture into the center of the mainstream media. 8 years and 4 expansions later, *World of Warcraft* and its developing company Blizzard, continue to preside over a teeming community of gamers numbering in the millions.

Aside from its dominance of the MMO market, WoW has led the way in several key gameplay aspects, leading many to regard it as the quintessential fantasy MMO. WoW operates largely on the premise of cooperative play, encouraging users to band together in balanced groups to overcome obstacles (Bergstrom, 2009). Though this concept of grouping individuals with highly specialized roles is utilized by many games, it is exemplified in WoW, which has continuously honed the minutia of class balancing and group dynamics over the 8-year span of its operation. The importance of cooperative play in MMO games cannot be overstated, as it is in many ways the driving force behind the popularity of the genre (Williams & Caplan, 2008). Companionship, competition, and social fulfillment are but a few of the rewards offered by MMOs that are rarely duplicated in offline computer games. Moreover WoW is rife with functions and tools designed

to enhance the social experience such as differentiated chat channels, automated group assembling tools (or finders), and services such as Real ID that allow users to build intimate social networks across multiple game platforms. The result is a concretization of social structures and networks that have allowed close personal bonds and relationships to flourish (Cole & Griffiths, 2007).

As noted by economist Edward Castronova, MMOs house hundreds of thousands of users contributing their labor and time to the creation of virtual goods and services (Castronova, 2007). The economy of Azeroth (the fictional world of WoW) is robust, so robust in fact that it has transcended the confines of the game and spilled into the non-virtual world. The sale of virtual goods and accounts for U.S. dollars (USD) is commonplace, despite being expressly forbidden by the game's end user license agreement (EULA) (Glas, 2010). Automated resource collecting bots and teams of dedicated full-time WoW players are but a few of the tactics employed by opportunistic individuals seeking to amass real world profits through the virtual realm (Dibbell, 2006). Despite these activities, the creation and sale of virtual goods still resides within a nebulous area of law as players and developers continue to negotiate the standards of practice and fair play. WoW exemplifies Castronova's idea of the virtual economy, a vibrant and volatile economic structure forged through the collective transactions of countless actors (Castronova, 2007).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly of all, WoW serves as an effective example of innovation and change, particularly with regard to the incorporation of user generated tools and suggestions (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008). Throughout its span of operation the game itself has undergone a host of modifications and changes,

from simple patch fixes and glitch remedies to full gameplay overhauls and expansions (Glas, 2010). As such with each reiteration, the game is altered in some way, often in response to user demand or practices. One area where this is most evident is the User interface or UI. The user interface, consisting of the many buttons and displays involved in controlling the user's avatar, has long been the subject of revision and user modification (Taylor, 2008). Since its beginnings in the initial 2004 release of WoW, the UI has undergone significant changes to increase user efficiency and remove unnecessary functions and aesthetic elements (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008). Furthermore many of these changes have been adopted from user-generated modifications or add-ons (Prax, 2012). Add-ons are user-created programs which alter the aesthetics of the game or add extraneous functions not originally presented in the game software. Typically users download add-ons from 3rd party websites and install them as they see fit. The notion of add-ons themselves are remarkable in both their capacity to enhance user agency as well as the degree to which they have been incorporated within normative gameplay (Glas, 2010). In this regard user generated innovations and tools have become inextricably woven into the experience of the game itself. What were once extraneous side programs devised by enthusiastic hobbyists have now been drawn into the fold of the developer and replicated within the official parameters of the game. While certain add-ons have been expressly prohibited by Blizzard, add-on creation represents a critical venue of influence and agency for game players. In offering a means to customize one's own playing experience, add-ons tap into what Glas terms, a

“battlefield of negotiation” (Glas, 2010, p. 43) and permit users a stake in the continued development of the game.

Aside from the practices of direct modification and add-on creation, WoW provides the average user with a plethora of options for opening dialogue with developers. Blizzard hosts an extensive system of official forums allowing users to interact with each other but also provide feedback and critique to the developers on game changes, routine patches, and service updates. Moreover suggestion forums and discussion threads are hardly limited to user interaction as system developers and Blizzard representatives frequently address user comments and contribute to particularly lively debates. Blizzard representatives, colloquially referred to as “blue-posts” (a reference to the fact that their comments appear in blue on official forums), are such a common sight in forums that they will occasionally find themselves embroiled in user politics and demonstrations such as the Real ID uproar, wherein a Blizzard employee’s personal information and location was broadcast en masse across the forums (Polo, 2010). In the case of Real ID, the community was responding to what they believed was a breach of privacy and an unfair policy decision on behalf of the developer, a decision which was eventually overturned due in no small part to the action on the forums. Protests, petitions, and even outright displays of disobedience all demonstrate the collective bargaining power of the community forums. While the developer undoubtedly remains the loudest voice in guiding the evolution of WoW, it is difficult to discount the continued labor, feedback, and participation of the users.

In identifying some of the socio-cultural and developmental hallmarks of WoW, I have illustrated the significant impact it has had on the MMO genre. As a game and cultural text, WoW is emblematic of an emergent pattern of game production, one which takes into account both the importance of technological convergence as well as the influence of the user. For these reasons it provides an exemplary arena of research and an ideal candidate for the continued study of MMOs.

In the following chapters I explain how I approached the research question at hand, what was gained from the interviews, and ultimately how this study has led to a fuller understanding of how users actively push the margins of innovation in the game *World of Warcraft*. First, I provide a detailed review of the existing literature and theories informing MMO game studies presently. Key aspects of this include work by Rene Glas on Games of Stake theory and negotiated play (Glas, 2010) as well as Eric Von Hippel's research on user driven innovation and online innovation communities (Hippel, 2005). The methodology chapter details the scope of the study and expands on the processes by which I recruited participants, conducted interviews, and stored data. The data chapter presents my raw findings, detailing the participants and examining issues of balance, endgame exclusivity, paratext use, and game dilution. My analysis chapter parses out the relevant findings from the data and elaborates on the relationship between users, paratexts and innovation. Lastly my conclusion discusses the overall efficacy of the study and outlines potential direction for future research on user innovation in MMOs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While massive multiplayer online games, or MMOs for short, have only existed in their current form since the early 1990's, a vast repository of literature has been generated around their use, development, and social impacts. Given their polarizing nature, it should come as no surprise that the majority of the early literature focused on the perceived addictive, detrimental properties of MMO games. Indeed such research commonly fueled social anxiety around MMO usage, painting MMO players as misanthropic social recluses who had become trapped in the fantasy worlds of Norrath and Azeroth (Lemmens & Valkenburg, 2009). While such accusations would hardly be the last in characterizing MMOs as addictive and socially distorting, the academic community has since recognized that game studies and particularly MMOs offer robust avenues of research outside of dependency studies. Because of their technologically convergent nature, MMOs sit at the crossroads of online socialization, fantasy narrative, gaming entertainment, and software development. More importantly MMOs allow for the mutual interaction and influence of these aspects in remarkable ways leading to online communities of fledgling game designers, complex feature length fantasy films or "machinima", fiercely competitive "professional" gaming leagues, and innumerable other collaborations of gameplay, community and innovation (Glas, 2010). As such the literature on MMOs has expanded considerably in the last 10 years alone, opening new avenues of research which look beyond simple questions of online addiction or moral panics (Bergstrom, 2009) and into how users are constructing online

identities and redefining our understanding of games and participation. In researching games one is now faced with an overwhelming miasma of social and innovative phenomena as overlapping fields of expertise and increasingly complex interdisciplinary issues become commonplace. The very range and complexity of MMO games helps contribute to the chaotic nature of their study as they can be notoriously disparate in terms of gameplay, goals and structure. One need only look at the striking differences between games like *Everquest*, an archetypal fantasy-based MMO, and *Second Life*, a protean digital sandbox bordering on the concept of virtual free-space, to note the difficulties in unifying the MMO genre under an explicit set of descriptors (Brookey & Cannon, 2009). The following sections will seek to bring order to the tangled morass of MMO literature, first by describing in greater detail the game which I have chosen to study, *World of Warcraft*, and secondly by dividing the relevant literature into 3 main categories as they pertain to this study; social, gameplay, and development.

2.1 Social

With so much focus being placed on the social consequences and possibilities of MMOs, it should come as no surprise that an inordinate amount of the literature is concentrated on the study and deconstruction of in-game virtual communities.

Foremost among these are quantitative studies which seek to identify and characterize the demographics of the WoW community. In this regard, quantitative work has been highly effective in establishing a bank of statistics on MMO players, from their average age and occupation, to their familial status and social ties (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). While these base statistics may give us a general idea of who

chooses to take part in the virtual world, the majority of these projects seek to delve even deeper into the heart of MMO usage, mapping out the intricacies of social experience and friendship. In their 2007 study, Cole and Griffiths sought to uncover the frequency with which online contacts were amalgamated into user's offline friend circles, moreover the degree to which offline activities and interests penetrated the online worlds of Azeroth and Norrath. Additionally Cole and Griffiths' study logged a range of other intriguing statistics including attraction between male and female users, playing hours per week, and even the frequency with which users would meet in the real world (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Meet up statistics remain an area of particular interest as they represent an active departure from the virtual realm and the assignment of real life commitments, that is users must travel, organize meeting times, and abide by decided schedules. Moreover with regard to innovation and development, the dynamic of meet up events is not unlike that of a focus group or traditional innovation community as like-minded individuals often exchange ideas on playing style, popular resources, and prospective game developments.

The effect of MMOs on social capital and offline friend communities has also been the subject of much quantitative analysis. In 2006, Dmitri Williams took a closer look at the relationship between MMO engagement and the decline of social networks and capital (Williams & Caplan, 2008). Similar to previous studies, including the one performed by Cole and Griffiths, Williams noted statistics on average player age and playing hours, however he also looked at factors such as trust, strength of familial bonds, and loneliness (Williams & Caplan, 2008). These

additional variables, specifically chosen to reflect the participant's level of community or civic engagement, harkened back to earlier fears of MMOs diminishing the social networks of users and creating a generation of computer addicted shut ins. However Williams's work demonstrated that the relationship between MMO usage and social capital was minimal, with a slight decline in the maintenance of extended friend networks being the most significant detrimental effect (Williams & Caplan, 2008). Moreover Williams demonstrated that MMOs had no adverse impact on users' physical and mental health when isolated from external influencing factors. Rather the social stimulation provided by participation in online communities often served to temporarily alleviate preexisting feelings of loneliness and detachment in participants (Williams & Caplan, 2008). With regard to exploring paratext creation and innovation, Williams' work provided an exemplary quantitative foundation for examining the impact of extended community involvement and its effects on users. In sum, the work of Williams and other quantitative projects have logged considerable data on the demographics and base motivations of MMO users, however further literature must be consulted to understand how in-game communities function and promote user agency on a collective level.

Many scholars have examined the workings of virtual communities on a micro level, pulling apart the intricacies of every day interactions between avatars in a consistent social matrix. While the otherworldly realms of MMOs may seem a far cry from the local coffee shop or rec center, much of the literature has shown that interpersonal relationships and community life largely parallel offline

counterparts in terms of group ties, trust creation, and delegation of responsibility. In particular, work by Ratan, Chung & Shen has looked at the establishment of consistent social institutions as the precursor for trust generation in virtual communities (Ratan, Chung & Shen, 2010). Similar to offline groups, trust is fostered most effectively when members are part of a semi-permanent or recurring social structure. The recursive nature of the community thus limits anonymity and allows users to build stable identities and reputations (Ratan, Chung & Shen, 2010). While Ratan, Chung & Shen looked at a variety of MMO games, many of their conclusions can be applied directly to WoW as guilds and other working groups comprise the stabilized social institutions so integral to trust creation in the game, particularly so in high end raiding guilds. Moreover Ratan, Chung & Shen utilize the theoretical basis of Pure Relationship theory, as developed by Anthony Giddens, in explaining the dynamics of online interpersonal relationships (Ratan, Chung & Shen, 2010).

Pure relationship theory, which describes the pursuit of friendships as divorced from physical and cultural anchors such as appearance, wealth, or marital status, have traditionally been an apt framework for the study of online relationships and as such Giddens has become a commonly referenced figure in the study of virtual communities (Giddens, 1991). However Pure Relationship theory does not adequately address the introduction of offline elements into the online relationship, a situation which undoubtedly arises in online innovation communities where users often exchange personal information and details. Similarly, Denise Carter applies the concept of pure relationships in looking at the normalization of platonic friendships in the virtual space of *CyberCity* (Carter, 2011). In her 2011

study, Carter examined the persistence and sustainability of online relationships and their gradual shift into offline environments (Carter, 2011). If applied to the communities of WoW, similar effects are observed through local area meet up groups and even more candid affairs between intimately familiar friends and acquaintances. Yet strong bonds often persist between WoW users who have never met in person, and may even be separated by vast geographical distances. While strictly pure relationships are often temporary as the accumulation of personal details and trivia are inevitable in any social relationship (Henderson & Gilding, 2004), online communities such as guilds are strengthened by participation in shared activities and the pursuit of common goals (Taylor, 2008). In this regard the collaborative online activities of adventuring through dungeons or performing raids, highly complex tasks involving the coordination of multiple users, may act as a surrogate for face to face meetings as they serve to reinforce group ties without entirely destroying the anonymity of the digital relationship. In this way guild communities can be sustained for months or even years, allowing close personal bonds to flourish between individuals who will likely never meet in an offline setting.

While cozy social communities are undoubtedly an attractive element of game play for many, they also serve a vastly more important function with regard to user innovation; the fostering of competition (Y. Lin & H. Lin, 2011). In many ways competition remains the driving force behind the development of add-ons and user stratagems. Users in close knit communities, particularly high-end raiding communities, are more likely to compete with their fellow guild mates and push the

limits of the game. These are the “early adopters” of the gaming community, utilizing novel tools, resources, and playing styles to gain an edge over the competition (Glas, 2010). As such the online communities of WoW are more than mere cultural microcosms and social phenomena; they are the engines of user innovation propelling forward the development of the gaming experience itself.

The third tier in terms of social research involves examining how online communities and social institutions are sustained on a macro level. This body of literature moves beyond the scope of individual relationships and seeks to explain the machinations of virtual social structures as a collective. In looking once more to the characterization of digital spaces and virtual environments, several scholars have drawn comparisons between traditionally recognized “3rd places” and the in game communities of WoW (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). 3rd places are most primarily described as venues outside of the workplace or home where individuals can socialize in a politically neutral and casual environment (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). While often associated with pubs, coffee shops, and other hubs of leisure, these same definitions commonly apply to online game spaces such those found in WoW. Online communities such as guilds function largely outside the realm of offline social capital and class hierarchy; as such they present an ideal forum for the exchange of ideas and casual discussion without the cultural pressures of professional or familial ties. While internal divisions related to game experience and guild organization do exist, these constitute a social structure unique to the gaming environment and largely divorced from the domain of the real (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). In-game communities thus serve as a retreat from everyday life,

while locally normative rules and codes of conduct do apply, they thrive because of their ability to provide respite from the offline world. In this regard MMOs have been praised for their level of technological convergence, combining the entertaining elements of an immersive fantasy adventure game with the social networking capabilities of contemporary chat rooms and forums (Snodgrass, Lacy, Dengah, & Fagan, 2011).

Not unlike Facebook or other modern social networking platforms, MMOs can be understood as a bridging device which allows individuals of similar interest and association to connect remotely. In this way MMOs generate social reservoirs for people to convene across economic, political, and geographical boundaries (Snodgrass et al., 2011). While users with existing offline associations may interact online, they do so within a decontextualized environment where their real world affiliations mean little (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). The importing of offline relationships into the digital realm has also been shown to provide additional benefits such as safeguarding against immersive dependency or “internet addiction” (Snodgrass et al., 2011, p. 1212). In a 2011 study conducted by Snodgrass et al., users who played MMOs with family members or other offline friends demonstrated more balanced investment within game communities (2011). Balanced investment meaning they were less likely to spend inordinate amounts of time online or develop problematic gaming patterns (Snodgrass et al., 2011). In this regard the social networking capabilities of MMOs and their ability to incorporate preexisting community structures have been viewed as a means of mediating online life and promoting a healthier gaming environment.

Both of these concepts of games as 3rd places as well as heterogeneous social venues offer an insightful means of decoding the longevity and fulfilling properties of online communities. Moreover they help shed light on the question of how and why these communities actively churn out such an ample supply of user-created products such as wiki's and YouTube videos. However it is also necessary to look more systematically at the dynamics and organization of these social structures, particularly concerning the flow of intellectual, social, and innovative resources. In 2010, Ang & Zaphiris conducted precisely this type of study in mapping out the interactions between individuals within a *World of Warcraft* guild. In applying a block modeling technique borrowed from social network analysis, Ang & Zaphiris were able to identify 3 major social strata and track the communicative patterns which transpired between them (2010). The 3 groups labeled A, B, and C, correspond to core, intermediary, and periphery structures respectively (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010). A group or core members were the most active members of the guild, they occupied positions of operational power as administrators and officers, and were also the primary sources of in-game knowledge and assistance. In contrast, C group or periphery members were the least invested in the guild and were most often recipients of assistance. The remaining B group members occupied the middle ground and were largely in various states of transition from periphery to core (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010). As such we see not only distinct guild class structures but a discernible flow of resources, in the form of advice and direct assistance, moving from core to periphery. This model accounts for much of the stability of guild culture, providing immediate rewards for new recruits (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010).

Moreover it is theoretically self-sustaining as new members should logically progress from periphery to core, replacing core members who move on or abdicate their positions for whatever reason. The core to periphery model is also effective in terms of knowledge transmission as it serves to disseminate key elements of colloquial expertise that are not generally available through official developer-provided channels. This specified knowledge can be anything from alternative play strategies to advice on external resources such as user-generated tutorials or databases. In this regard the model promotes collective stability and fosters the growth of user agency. While research regarding the social ramifications of MMOs is indeed extensive, it remains but one component of the literature relevant to my study. Moving forward I will now explore how gaming philosophy and motivation have situated user innovation and game development.

2.2 Gameplay

Deconstructing the motivations and dynamics of play for MMO users yields a multitude of practical approaches, value systems, and novel in-game behaviors. While the body of research I have included under the topic of gameplay is quite broad, the common issue which threads this literature together is the question of how MMO users choose to spend their time in the digital world. Undoubtedly several aspects of user motivation such as competition and social gratification have already been discussed at length, however in examining gameplay it is my intent to look specifically at how the mechanics of the game have been manipulated, altered, and even exploited by users in novel and sometimes destructive ways. Gameplay in this regard, is in many ways the guiding hand of innovation, creating favorable

conditions for the rise of user-generated resources or opening functional niches for the application of various mods and add-on programs. As such I will be exploring the existing literature on gameplay along 3 major tropes, the accumulation of wealth, the creation of alternative play styles, and the transcending of the magic circle (Huizinga, 1949). It should be noted however, that while these areas of literature tend to focus on specific in-game phenomena, they are also inextricably tied to the social realm. Being inherently social in nature, MMOs are constantly affected by the ebb and flow of the digital populace and as such the literature cannot be neatly compartmentalized. Rather the notions of gameplay and social involvement should be viewed as mutually affecting forces in the ecology of the digital world.

In looking to the principles of gameplay, the accumulation of in-game wealth has long been a hallmark of the MMO genre (Castronova, 2007). Whether game capital takes the form of exchangeable currency, conspicuous items or goods (Veblen, 1953/2000), or even prestige titles, the expansion of one's personal fortune remains a major motivating factor for MMO players (Y. Lin & H. Lin, 2011). In this regard wealth and the exhibition of capital have paralleled conspicuous display in the offline world, with items of higher value being assigned elaborate aesthetics and fantastical auras. As noted by Griffiths, the continuous exposure of in-game trappings creates a more salient digital hierarchy, visually reinforcing the distinction between digital haves and have-nots (Griffiths & Light, 2008). Moreover as stated by Edward Castronova, players often enter the online world of MMOs penniless and destitute. The progression from pauper to prosperous thus forms a

considerable piece of the game's narrative structure and allows the users to live out their own story of economic mobility (Castronova, 2007).

In looking to WoW the distinctions between the rich and poor are remarkably overt. Structurally, WoW is designed to encourage accumulation and fiscal success both as a means of progressing through the game but also to create social hierarchy and competition (Glas, 2010). As in many other MMOs, the most sought after goods require an investment of time, in-game capital, or occasionally real-world capital, as is the case with Linden Lab's *Second Life* (Brookey & Cannon, 2009). This unequal distribution of virtual goods thus creates artificial scarcity of an essentially infinite product, assigning a significant prestige value to certain items. While this strategy may be successful in providing a more engaging gaming experience, it has also had the adverse effect of propagating scams, deceptions, and even virtual black markets (Griffiths & Light, 2008). The issue was examined in depth by Griffiths and Light who looked at patterns of accumulation and theft in the MMO *Habbo Hotel*. Similar to most MMOs, *Habbo* allowed users to collect and display in-game goods and winnings. Because these goods required considerable effort to obtain, they became coveted symbols of status and prestige, inevitably leading to a rise in virtual property theft, fraud, and other unscrupulous behaviors (Griffiths & Light, 2008). While the notion of scamming other users or otherwise transgressing the rules of the game does itself constitute a novel and unintended style of play, Griffiths and Light were more concerned with the notion of virtual fraud and whether the theft of an online good which required, time, labor, and real world capital to obtain should constitute crime in the offline world (Griffiths & Light,

2008). More importantly how the collective action and investment placed in virtual worlds such as *Habbo*, *Norrath*, or *Azeroth* could ultimately affect our real-world ethics and standards of justice (Griffiths & Light, 2008).

Similar concerns are voiced by R.V. Kelly 2 in his book *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*, which notes that user created cheat programs, macros, and other functions which violate the EULA of MMO games are likely to rise (Kelly 2, 2004). Though written in 2004 before the launch of WoW and many of the contemporary MMOs in circulation today, Kelly 2's prophetic words have largely come to pass. While the previously discussed virtual sweatshops or "gold farms" (Dibbell, 2006, p. 141) are an incarnation of this, one may also look to the online sale of game accounts as well as the proliferation of user-created programs and add-ons which transgress the game EULA. Perhaps the one development unforeseen by Kelly2 in 2004 is that game developers now have the power to monitor users outside of the game world. While Kelly 2 stated that cheating in MMOs would increase due to developer surveillance being limited to the online environment, EULA's for many games, including WoW, now require that users allow monitoring software to be run on their home computers to track their online activity. Indeed the surveillance software is so deeply obscured in the game client that users are often unaware it has been installed on their personal computers at all. Not unlike Griffith and Light's examination of virtual theft, issues of privacy and developer surveillance encroach on our offline sensibilities of justice and criminal behavior. As we continue to amass goods and spend increasingly longer amounts of time in virtual worlds, one can only expect that users will continue to push the margins of what is

considered acceptable engagement and innovate increasingly complex ways to optimize their own in-game experiences.

Continuing on the theme of alternative playing styles, several authors have examined gaming practices and strategies that have deviated from the original intentions of the developer, though not necessarily in destructive ways. In a 2009 study, Bergstrom identified the ways MMOs, in particular *World of Warcraft*, can be used to facilitate romantic relationships between co-located couples (Bergstrom, 2009). Not unlike the work of Steinkuehler and Williams, Bergstrom found that online environments functioned as effective “3rd places” for socialization and leisure (Bergstrom, 2009). More importantly she found that the unique nature of online worlds afforded romantic couples the opportunity to explore their relationship in ways not typically feasible within offline 3rd places. The use of MMOs as a romantic venue thus exhibits a departure from traditional styles of play yet provides a means of enriching ones gaming experience without altering the game mechanics directly.

The innovation of play in this regard falls into Glas’ model of negotiated development, forging new patterns of user agency and engagement in terms of gameplay and game culture (Glas, 2010). Glas himself provides a detailed look at deviant or unintended play styles in his book *Games of Stake: control, agency and ownership in World of Warcraft*, particularly with regard to the practice of “twinking” (Glas, 2010, p. 57). Twinking is thus described as halting the progression of one’s avatar before it reaches the end game content. Doing so allows the user to remain at a particular level of play indefinitely, collect the best available items and equipment, and dominate other users of similar level in player versus player

scenarios (Glas, 2010). Undoubtedly this was not the developers intended outcome in terms of gameplay and indeed the practice has had an adverse effect on in-game power dynamics at the player versus player level (PvP), however the popularity of twinkling has still managed to influence the development of the game in several ways (Glas, 2010). Blizzard itself has gone through alternating periods of support, initially encouraging the practice through the addition of twink-oriented items catering to the needs of the demographic, but later attempting to phase it out entirely by introducing items which made twinkling obsolete (Glas, 2010). In essence twinkling represents an alternative style of play which ranges from capricious to destructive, while many users engage in it simply to break the monotony of everyday MMO routine, others see it as an opportunity to upset the balance of power and claim ownership of the game (Glas, 2010).

A final and arguably more intentional form of alternative play is that of role-play itself. While the notion of role-playing may seem implicit in the game itself (they are after all known as Multiplayer Role Playing Games), active role playing which requires the adoption of a fictional persona, appearance, mannerisms, and colloquial devices, is a notably arduous practice and requires adherence to explicit rules of conduct (Mortensen, 2008). In many ways role playing is counterproductive to the social functions of MMOs, as role players will never know another user's real name, personal details, or contact information outside the game. Furthermore Mortensen noted that the effort required to maintain role-playing scenarios often hinder progression through the game while providing little in the way of practical rewards (Mortensen, 2008). Interestingly, role-players may even be the target of

abuse and harassment within the MMO community itself, as certain WoW servers dedicated to role-playing are often crashed by non-role playing users who deride the local players and seek to disrupt the role-playing narrative (Glas, 2010). As such role-playing constitutes an alternative and largely marginalized style of play, contributing little with regard to game content but allowing users to inhabit a more immersive fantasy world.

While many of these alternative play styles require little in the way of technical innovation, they do serve to demonstrate user agency with regard to the intended uses of MMOs and *World of Warcraft*. Rather than creating embodied innovations such as add-ons or other paratexts, alternative play focuses on the development of new techniques which nonetheless have a profound impact on the game itself. Alternative play illustrates the “interpretive flexibility” of MMOs, and the capacity of users to apply their own rules and value systems to the existing technology (Griffiths & Light, 2008, p. 451). As these fields of application continue to be redefined, we see a breakdown of what Johan Huizinga referred to as “the magic circle” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 11). While Huizinga originally put forward the concept of the magic circle as a sacred area within which the rules of play govern removed from the overarching contexts of society, it seems clear that with regard to MMOs this magic circle has become increasingly porous.

Having looked briefly at the ways user-generated resources such as wiki’s and databases have begun to merge the world of the real and the world of games, however Moore suggests that the degradation of the magic circle is also taking place on a physical level through the use of mobile technologies as gaming platforms

(Moore, 2011). Increasingly games are being played on mobile platforms such as cell phones, as such users are given partial access to the magic circle while remaining largely engrossed in offline activities such as waiting for the bus or standing in line at the supermarket (Moore, 2011). In looking specifically to WoW, we see the rise of mobile device based applications such as Auction House or Authenticator which allow users to keep one foot in the world of Azeroth regardless of their location. To borrow from Baudelaire, Moore puts forward the whimsical notion of the “gameur”, a novel form of game player who treads easily and often between the offline world and the game world (Moore, 2011, p. 375). The concept of the gameur is notable in that it actively transgresses the magic circle, bringing offline experience, discussion, and issues into the realm of the game. The gameur actively engages with all forms of user-generated content, or paratexts, and contributes to the growth and circulation of these texts within the player community (Moore, 2011). As such the concept of the gameur, as an individual who seeks to expand the resources and community of the game beyond the vacuum of the magic circle, is characteristic of the modern day MMO user. Indeed it could be said that any MMO user who has ever accessed a user-generated wiki, made an instructional YouTube video, downloaded a user-made add-on, or even written a fan-fiction fulfills this role. This sentiment is echoed in Henry Jenkins’ work on digital fan culture. Looking instead to the medium of television, Jenkins notes that online spaces have become thriving venues of discussion for enthusiasts to share opinions on media, put forth alternative narratives, and even derail official media activities (Jenkins, 2006). Online communities in this regard allow for the creation of a collective fan culture through

the rapid dissemination of materials and opinion (Jenkins, 2006). The paratexts produced in these venues thus function similarly to the ones produced in MMO communities as they deeply affect how users perceive and engage with officially released media products.

Just as the offline world has continued to encroach upon the virtual realm, so too have the properties of digital environments begun to spill out into the real. Edward Castronova has already written at length on the institutions of virtual worlds, such as their economies, population, and labor value, and the impact they have had on their offline counterparts (Castronova, 2007). In *Exodus to the Virtual World*, Castronova posits that given their tremendous growth, popularity, and ease of access, virtual worlds will become increasingly imbued with the values and standards of the offline realm (Castronova, 2007). This is most evident in the case of EULA's, which comprise the ironclad governing authority of developers over their virtual domains. Indeed as more users have immigrated to the virtual world they have also begun to demand more accountability from their administrators, leading to increasingly complex legal battles with regard to labor and ownership of online game accounts (Humphreys, 2008). However this influx of labor has also become the source of considerable innovation, as users continue to develop programs, strategies, and various other paratexts to cope with rising populations and competition. As such virtual worlds are themselves amenable to user innovation and progression, being continuously open to manipulation through updates and patches. Moreover MMOs such as WoW provide extensive public forums which allow users to voice concerns, air grievances, and hold active dialogues with the developing

party (Castronova, 2007). Similarly, Kelly 2 has stated that the user-developer relationship is destined to expand given the participatory nature of MMO games (Kelly 2, 2004). Not unlike the governance of physical territories, MMO developers are responsible for creating the foundations and infrastructure of online worlds, however if they are to keep these spaces diegetically satisfying, they must also take into account the needs and desires of the users (Kelly 2, 2004). That being said the expansion of the user-developer relationship opens the door for the rise of user generated paratexts and other reservoirs of cultural knowledge. Interestingly much of the allure of game worlds may now be located outside the boundaries of the game itself, in user created websites, videos, programs and communities (Kelly 2, 2004).

In terms of transcending the magic circle, I think it can be said that MMOs operate on a hybridized model, bridging the online and offline through gameplay activities, motivations, interaction with real world peers, and the creation of paratexts. All these factors inevitably lead to questions of user innovation; particularly how these user contributions are conceived, tested, and negotiated against the interests of the developer. The final body of literature will deal with precisely these questions, as well as expose the deficit of research on community involvement and user innovation that this study seeks to address.

2.3 Development

Having parsed through the vast collection of literature on MMOs, it seems clear that innovation and user-driven development are heavily influenced by innumerable social, technological, and cultural factors. In this regard innovation in MMO games has been the focus of a relatively select body of literature, which has

sought to explore the way users interact directly with developers to alter the progression of the game. Though lacking the robust volume of research dedicated to the social and cultural impacts of MMOs, the study of innovation in virtual worlds can nonetheless be divided into distinct streams examining co-creation of MMOs, governance of the online environment, and the mechanisms of negotiated production.

Co-creation, which refers to the active collaboration between users and developers for the production of cultural texts, has been regarded with varying degrees of success. Not limited to the field of MMOs, Nieborg and Graaf have examined how user-created program modifications or “mods” have been around since the late 1990’s, particularly within the first-person-shooter genre (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008). In the case of “modding”, co-creation differs from simple user input and feedback in that users are given the tools to create their own products based off of the developer’s game engine or client (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008). Mods thus allow for a more direct form of user innovation, largely removed from the constraining policies enforced by developing parties. For the user this approach offers considerable creative freedom and license to alter the game in radical ways, while the developer enjoys extended returns on their initial product as users who wish to play the mod must still purchase the original game content (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008). This kind of innovative symbiosis is exemplified in the case study of *Counterstrike*, an immensely popular mod run on software developed by Valve Entertainment (Nieborg & Graaf, 2008). While the mod itself was developed and distributed by users, it eventually became such a success that it was inducted into Valve’s official

product line (Neiborg & Graaf, 2008). *Counterstrike* remains a poignant example of the successes of mod culture and user-driven development, however not all examples of co-creation turn out so favorably.

In 2007, Auran games released the MMO *Fury*, a co-creative project produced through the combined efforts of a professional development team and a dedicated community of player-tester groups (Banks & Potts, 2010). Within a year of release, *Fury* was defunct and considered a major commercial failure, with a considerable amount of the developing staff being laid off (Banks & Potts, 2010). Though Auran's participatory approach to development was initially met with enthusiastic response from its user base, the relationship between developers and player communities became increasingly strained as the project continued. In its early stages, Auran's approach to development was grounded in an "open innovation system" which sought to fully utilize player expertise in the areas of game mechanics, play experience, and even aesthetic choices (Banks & Potts, 2010, p. 256). Users were included in the development process as product testers but also contributed extensively through community forums and email correspondence (Banks & Potts, 2010). Additionally much of the marketing for the game hinged on word-of-mouth promotions, which would presumably trickle down through the player-tester communities and into the general gaming consciousness (Banks & Potts, 2010). Idealistic as this model was, development was plagued by differences of creative opinion and disputes over control of the end product. While Auran retained final authority on implementing changes and game developments, members of the player community who had volunteered a considerable amount of time and labor to the

project felt they were being excluded from critical decision-making processes (Banks & Potts, 2010). Worse yet, as relations soured former player testers accused Auran of exploiting its user base for free labor, contributing to the already noxious social media atmosphere surrounding the game (Banks & Potts, 2010). Ultimately, the failure of *Fury* was the result of the developer's inability to effectively coordinate both professional and grassroots expertise (Banks & Potts, 2010).

Co-creation in this regard offers a unique if not somewhat volatile opportunity for developers to engage directly with their clientele while benefiting from the voluntary services and marketing channels they provide. Yet despite the potential rewards of utilizing this "open innovation system", many developers are still loathe to relinquish any measure of their own administrative power (Banks & Potts, 2010, p. 256). While true modding is not a feature found in *WoW*, Blizzard does not release information on the game engine and code to the public, Prax has likened the creation of add-ons to a mitigated culture of co-creation (Prax, 2012). Indeed add-ons represent the closest innovative process to full modification as they allow users to alter the UI in eclectic and dramatic ways. That being said, the extent of influence employed through add-ons is limited when compared to co-creative movements at large.

Governance of the virtual world is itself the focus of a considerable amount of literature. In 2008 Humphreys examined the role of developers in administering and controlling the MMO environments they worked to create (Humphreys, 2008). Given the complex social and economic dynamics of MMO worlds, administration in this regard includes not only the enforcement of game mechanics, such as the limits

on what avatars can perform or achieve in digital space, but also control of user-produced content and other forms of engagement. As such, virtual worlds are largely managed in a totalitarian, if not sometimes tyrannical, fashion leaving users with little recourse when beset by the authority of the developing party (Humphreys, 2008). Aside from the policies of the developer, users tend to exercise a great degree of self-monitoring and peer-surveillance in terms of maintaining functional communities and maximizing performance within top tier guild groups (Humphreys, 2008). Interestingly the same user-created programs and add-ons which are often the focus of strict regulation are also the primary tools which allow users to survey and police each other, particularly within high pressure player versus player scenarios and end game content (Humphreys, 2008). Yet despite any notions of agency and co-veillance, users are left with a meager set of options when confronted with the iron-clad EULA of MMO games. Indeed Humphreys argues that the only salient course of action available to most users is to simply leave the game and thus deprive the developer of their subscription revenue (Humphreys, 2008). While this “exit power” may appear to be a viable response to perceived injustice on behalf of the developers, it does not take into account the copious amounts of labor and time poured into the game by paying subscribers (Humphreys, 2008, p.163). Undoubtedly a user who has invested months or even years of time in an MMO account will be reluctant to simply abandon the game in protest of the developer’s policies. Rather it is the EULA, in many ways the constitution of the virtual kingdom, which has come under increased scrutiny and will play an instrumental role in determining the fate of the underrepresented user.

Notoriously convoluted and legally indecipherable to the average player, EULA's have long been the subject of user contempt and developer sovereignty. The EULA, which stands for end user license agreement, is the legally binding contract which users must submit to before entering the virtual world of MMOs and as such constitutes the bulk of the developers authoritative power (Grimmelmann, 2006). While the majority of terms put forth in EULA's are largely benign and designed to discourage practices such as harassment, exploitation, and copyright infringement, they have also been known to include policies which allow for the unconditional ejection of players from the game, monitoring of users' home computers, and mandatory installation of spyware along with the game client (Humphreys, 2008). Many scholars have argued that EULA's are themselves purposely unethical in that they essentially sell users a product to which they have neither full ownership nor any means of effectively protecting their investment (Dibbell, 2006). Furthermore as cases of litigation and virtual worlds are still considered legal curiosities more than criminal injustices, the chances of a user successfully challenging the EULA in a court of law are slim (Dibbell, 2006). EULA reform has thus become a hotly contested issue, with users beginning to demand more accountability from their virtual administrators. Participation in MMOs takes place on what Noveck refers to as the "meta-level", with users collaborating to produce intricate communities and paratexts that "breathe life into the virtual world" (Noveck, 2006, p. 260, 275). EULA's which exploit, stifle, or otherwise dissuade users from actively engaging with the game thus run the risk of creating a stagnated virtual environment which smothers user innovation, diminishes revenue for the developer and fails to deliver

a fulfilling experience for the gamer (Noveck, 2006). The notion of creative rights presents yet another issue, particularly where users have created and published novel resources, programs, scripts, or in-game items. Cory Ondrejka has noted that the terms of service regarding most MMOs strips users of any ownership rights over their creations and even their in-game accounts (Ondrejka, 2004). While this has been moderately effective in blocking the sale of game accounts for USD, it offers little incentive for profit-driven innovation. Other games such as *Second Life* have taken alternative approaches to the management of creative rights, allowing users distribute and sell their products on the virtual marketplace, however this kind of creative freedom remains limited to a relatively small number of games (Ondrejka, 2004).

The final, and seemingly most effective, approach to MMO development and innovation lies in the area of negotiated production. Similar to the aforementioned concepts of co-creation and EULA reform, negotiated production relies heavily on user contribution, however it is the fine balance between user agency and developer control which allows this model to flourish. Rene Glas, whose ideas form much of the theoretical underpinnings of this study, has identified 4 key areas in which users and developers interact during the creation process, “game play”, “game culture”, “game contract”, and “game design” (Glas, 2010, p. 52). These “battlefields of negotiation” are the grounds upon which developers and users operate, bargain, and often clash throughout the innovative process of MMO production (Glas, 2010, p. 52). Negotiation in this regard is a profoundly chaotic process with game mechanics and policies being thrown into a constant state of flux. While such instability may

seem to be the antithesis of an efficient, well-ordered and productive game environment, it provides optimal conditions for the growth of user innovation and experimentation (Glas, 2010). Glas noted that such an atmosphere of change and open dialogue has fostered an explosive growth of user-driven enterprises such as theorycraft (meticulous study of game strategies), user-interface modifications, community support, and 3rd party resource networks (user made wiki's and databases) (Glas, 2010). While not all user contributions have been retained, indeed destructive practices are quickly identified and removed, the ongoing relationship between user and developer has changed the face of the game considerably.

Not surprisingly, this approach to development also entails a unique set of challenges which must be met if the game is to succeed. The constant dialogue between user and developer must be monitored through forums, test groups, and in-game complaint queues. "Live development teams" must work continuously to smooth out game play issues and errors which occur as a result of the ever-changing game mechanics (Humphreys, 2008, p.160). Moreover the implementation of innumerable patches, expansions, and updates must be coordinated and streamlined in accordance with the needs of the virtual populace (Glas, 2010). In this regard productive power is distributed, however unevenly, between the player and the developer (Humphreys, 2008). While management of such a tremendous host of technological and cultural actors is indeed daunting, developers who successfully navigate the "battlefields of negotiation" will have maximized the productive power of their client base while yielding as little administrative control over their virtual worlds as possible.

In looking to existing studies on user-driven innovation with regard to both online and physical products, one must refer to Eric Von Hippel's Lead User Theory (Hippel, 2005). Lead User Theory, which examines the early adoption of new technologies and the trickle down effect that often follows, has been used to explore innovation in products ranging from extreme sporting equipment to open source software development. In this regard, product innovations which are pioneered by a relatively small initial group are duplicated or adapted by larger and larger numbers of users until they become standardized or co opted by the original developing party (Hippel, 2005). This model appears to illustrate in large part the innovation and development patterns found in MMO games, particularly *World of Warcraft*, as small sections of advanced users are often the architects of the paratexts and add-ons which come to permeate the game.

Drawing from the work of Von Hippel, Franke and Shah conducted similar studies of user innovation in offline environments, in particular extreme sporting communities (Franke & Shah, 2003). Over the course of their study they found that users made remarkable contributions to the development and distribution of niche products which could be categorized with regard to their "newness", "urgency", "market potential", and "commercialization" (Franke & Shah, p. 163). While these differentiations are useful in analyzing the development of physical products, they do not account for the complexity and communicative flexibility introduced through the formation of online communities. The work of Sawhney, Verona, and Prandelli addressed this by examining how online presence and virtual hubs affected user-innovation in active commercial companies and firms (Sawhney, Verona & Prandelli,

2005). Using leading automotive and pharmaceutical companies as case studies, they determined that creating online communities around product feedback and innovative inquiry provided 3 key benefits to the developing firms. The first being that online communities provided constructive bi-directional dialogue between users and developers, that online communities increased the level of engagement with users yielding more valuable input, and lastly that online collaboration with users vastly increased the size and scale of their communicative network (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). Similarly Füller, Bartl, Ernst, & Mühlbacher conducted in-depth netnography studies looking at the rise of community based innovation in large automotive companies, particularly Audi's interactive online Virtual Lab which improved user engagement and garnered useful information on user desires and potential innovations (Füller, Bartl, Ernst, & Mühlbacher, 2006). Further research on the impact virtual community-based innovation has been carried out by Stephen Flowers who coined the term "outlaw users" to refer to users who have implemented innovations in spite of technical or legal barriers (Flowers, 2008, p. 180). In relation to game studies, Flowers identifies the creation of mods and deviant paratexts which go against the terms of the EULA or exploit legal loopholes in the game contract as belonging to this category. Conversely, Wyatt has noted that the activities and habits of non-users must also be taken into account when examining large virtual systems. As non-user apathy can stifle the spread of online activity and subscribership, developers must work to keep virtual communities fulfilling as well as beneficial to keep the network relevant and prevent active users from becoming disinterested (Wyatt, 2005). Coming full circle, Von Hippel has also

written extensively on the existence of online innovation communities, particularly in relation to software modification (Hippel, 2005). While these groups share many similarities with the online communities of WoW, they differ with regard to functionality and the degree of direct agency afforded to them. As such they bear much more resemblance to the previously mentioned co-creative modding communities. Indeed, the question of how MMO communities in particular manage to create and implement innovations given their relatively meager influence over official game design and structure remains a previously unexplored issue and the primary focus of this study.

Though the current body of research on MMOs is indeed vast, there are considerable gaps in the literature concerning the study of user-driven innovative processes. Having looked at the quantitative composition of MMO communities (Williams & Caplan, 2008), the social ramifications of MMO involvement on offline activities (Cole & Griffiths, 2007), the goals and motivations of MMO players (Y. Lin & H. Lin, 2011), the ways users conceptualize digital spaces (Bergstrom, 2009), the means through which developers govern online worlds (Grimmelmann, 2006), and the productive endeavors of users themselves (Glas, 2010). However, what remains to be explored are the processes by which all of these factors culminate in the formation of user innovation and development. How does community involvement impact the adoption of user created paratexts? Which gameplay factors are most influential in dictating the use of add-on programs? Most importantly, how are users navigating the channels of development and innovating a product they have no

control over? Located between the boundaries of the existing literature, these are the highly inter-contextual questions which this study seeks to address.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Methods

My primary method of data collection was semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews were chosen as I felt they were ideal for garnering a comprehensive account of users' personal experiences and perceptions of the game. Given the nature of the questions being asked, this approach allowed me to explore the issue of user innovation in great depth and detail. While quantitative approaches would have allowed for a larger sample, it is unlikely that quantitative data alone would adequately address the complex mechanisms of ownership and user-innovation, which are the focus of this study. Additionally quantitative studies of MMO games concerning demographics, online relationships, and player motivations are already prolific and extremely detailed.

Interviews were held largely on campus, although 1 was conducted over Skype to better suit the participant's circumstances, and took approximately 50 to 70 minutes. During this time participants were asked about their in-game activities, engagement with online communities, and use of paratexts. Given the open structure of the interviews, participants were encouraged to ruminate on their gaming experiences and discuss various aspects of WoW that they found particularly fulfilling or challenging. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for further content analysis and coding of key themes.

In addition to interviews, documentary research was carried out looking at existing studies regarding MMO games and user-driven innovation, as well as user

made forums, commentaries, and the paratexts themselves. The dialogue between users and developers on official forums has been taken into account as well as user input on non-official message boards and web resources. In all cases the information had been openly published online and was free to access by anyone. In combination, these two methods of data gathering were sufficient to explore the questions of user innovation, gameplay ownership, and paratext engagement which were central to this research project as they allowed participants to directly relate their experiences while corroborating this data with existing resources.

3.2 Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of 20 questions designed to probe users' candid experiences and perceptions of the game. While all participants were asked the set 20 questions, the open-ended nature of the interviews also allowed the discussion to digress into interrelated topics or expand on certain questions which resonated particularly with the interviewee. Regarding the set questions, 8 were related to online communities and friendships, 7 dealt with paratext usage and contribution, and 3 inquired directly about user agency and game development. The remaining 2 questions focused on in-game activities and gaming habits. The guide itself was structured specifically to provide a natural progression from discussions of online communities through to user-driven innovation, thus easing the participants into discussing issues of agency, ownership, and negotiated play. Please refer to the appendix for a full copy of the interview guide.

3.3 Recruitment

Recruitment was carried out primarily through online means. 2 advertisements were placed on the website Craig's List requesting volunteers for the study. Additionally a recruitment website was created and linked to the online advertisement to bolster awareness and facilitate sign-up opportunities. Interviewees were not given any monetary incentive and participation was entirely voluntary. In addition to online recruitment I also familiarized myself with a local World of Warcraft meet-up group from which I drew participants. The group held face-to-face meetings every month or so, which I attended, but also communicated through a private online forum. Lastly, I posted printed ads on the bulletin boards of the Social Sciences buildings at the University of Calgary in an effort to reach the student community.

3.4 Participants

The research sample was composed of 10 participants drawn from a range of academic and professional backgrounds. While several were post-secondary students between the ages of 18 and 30 attending the University of Calgary, the sample also included non-students as well as working professionals over the age of 30. Participants under the age of 18 were not considered for the study as the mean age of MMO users is typically older however future studies may find the 12-18 demographic to be a fruitful area of inquiry.

The diversity of the sample was largely planned to allow for a broader research perspective. Aside from age requirements, participants could be current or past players so long as they had a minimum of 4 months experience playing *World of*

Warcraft. No preference was made with regard to including casual or advanced players as both were believed to be equally important to the study. As the primary aim of the project was to understand how the typical user appropriated and innovated the game given their limited initial resources and influence, the focus of this study remains the users themselves along with their perspectives and actions. To this extent, I specifically sought out average game players rather than developers or specialized programmers. Admittedly, speaking with Blizzard development staff or specific add-on authors would have yielded some interesting additional data however as the focus of the study remained the users themselves, I felt it prudent to limit my interview sample accordingly. All participants were current residents of Calgary, although some had played the game while living in other provinces as well. While a wider nation-wide sample may have improved the generalizability of the results, recruiting outside of Calgary was not a priority for this project. That being said, the scope and intent of this study remains rooted in looking to local *World of Warcraft* users and to this end the study yielded a relatively large and varied sample of Canadian users, the majority of which were drawn from the Calgary WoW community.

3.5 Data Storage and Analysis

All interviews were recorded via an audio recording device and subsequently transcribed. Interview transcripts were then coded for 217 recurring terms and grouped under 3 key groupings, Gameplay, Development, and Social Factors. These terms were not analyzed for the purposes of quantitative occurrence, but rather to identify trends over the course of the interview and the illustration of user motives

and experiences. The context in which the terms appeared were used to sort them into their respective groupings, allowing certain common items such as guilds to fall into multiple groupings depending on how they were perceived by the participant. In most cases co-occurring terms demonstrated which aspects of the game users felt to be most fulfilling, challenging, or alienating in addition to creating a profile of the most commonly discussed game issues and concerns. The patterns formed from the discussion and context of these terms formed the main themes which will later be examined in the data chapter.

3.6 Common Terms in the Study

Given the complex and burgeoning nature of game studies, it should come as no surprise that the field is rife with specialized terms and niche concepts particular to the study of gaming. To add to the confusion, often the meaning of these terms shift or change depending on which type of game is being studied. As such it appears necessary to outline some of the basic terms which will arise repeatedly over the course of this study.

The distinction between casual and advanced or hardcore players is one which will be encountered frequently throughout the course of this project. While several studies in the past have sought to quantify these roles through metrics such as playing hours per week (Williams & Caplan, 2008) or number of online acquaintances (Y. Lin & H. Lin, 2011), this study will seek to demarcate the two through qualitative means. While limited data was gathered from participants in regard to exact playing hours per week, all interviewees were asked about their community and guild involvement, their typical in game activities, and the degree to

which they felt committed to the game and fellow users. Given this data, advanced users were characterized as individuals who had strong guild ties and/or participated in a regular raid team, who's in-game activities revolved largely around endgame content and progression, and who felt a strong commitment or obligation to the game in terms of socializing with their communities and being present in team events. These characteristics were contrasted with casual players who, in addition to playing relatively less hours, maintained weak connections to online communities, did not engage with endgame content, and felt no obligation to participate in social activities.

Much of this study is concerned with the existence and use of paratexts. Paratexts in this sense refer to user-created media products, texts, programs, and in some cases online discussion venues. Prime examples of these include item databases, theory crafting resources (Paul, 2012), YouTube videos, extended forum discussions, and UI add-ons (Prax, 2012). In many ways paratexts form the unofficial culture of the game, the crystallization of user expertise through endless exploration, investment and trial and error. One key aspect of paratexts is that they do not originate from the developer itself, in this case Blizzard, though they may be monitored and eventually co-opted into the game design proper, this is particularly true of add-ons (Prax, 2012).

Lastly the issue of ownership in regard to online play is addressed frequently. Ownership in this sense is tied to Rene Glas' use of the term in *Games of Stake* (2010), and refers to the habits, goals and playing strategies accumulated by players over time. Ownership differs from prescribed play in that users may

approach game challenges or online situations in ways which the developer had not initially intended, thus exerting some degree of agency over their playing experience. This is also regarded as “negotiated” play (Glas, 2010, p. 28). Glas references this largely in his description of “twinking” (Glas, 2010, p. 57), a style of play which manipulates the experience-point system to gain an advantage over the competition, but it is also true of a multitude of other strategies which allow users to take shortcuts, circumvent particular bosses, or gain an edge in player-versus-player encounters.

Chapter 4: Data

Data was gathered from interviews with 10 participants from November to March of 2011. The sample was comprised of a diverse selection of participants in terms of age, employment, playing ability, and community involvement. Consequently they provided an interestingly broad, and at times oppositional, range of perspectives on user agency, innovation, and the relationship between users and developers. For the purposes of convenience and pseudonymity, all the participants have been assigned a letter by which they will be referred to in the study. Table 1.0 briefly summarizes the names and relevant details of all the participants.

Name	Sex	Status	Playing Style	Age
Zachary (Z)	Male	Active User	Moderate, Social	Youth (18-25)
Trent (T)	Male	Former User	Casual, Social	Young Adult (25-30)
Rae (R)	Female	Active User	Moderate, Social	Adult (30-50)
Devin (D)	Male	Active User	Advanced, Raider	Youth (18-25)
Karl (K)	Male	Active User	Casual, Solo	Adult (30-50)
Hector (H)	Male	Active User	Casual, Solo	Adult (30-50)
Logan (L)	Male	Former User	Advanced, Raider	Youth (18-25)
Samuel (S)	Male	Active User	Advanced, PvP	Youth (18-25)
Braden (B)	Male	Former User	Advanced, Raider	Young Adult (25-30)
Max (M)	Male	Active User	Advanced, Social	Young Adult (25-30)

Table 1.0 (note all names used are pseudonyms)

4.1 The Participants

Zachary (Z), a young male university student, is an intermediate gamer who plays largely with friends that he also knows offline. Z was introduced to the game through his offline peers who also make up the majority of his in-game guild community. Z takes part in light raiding but primarily runs high-level dungeons with his friends.

Similarly, Trent (T) describes himself as a casual player with a robust gaming community composed of both offline and strictly online acquaintances. Unlike Z, T derives considerable fulfillment from the immersive nature of WoW, putting particular value on the fantasy and narrative aspects of the game. While he eschews the competitive realm of endgame raiding, T is familiar with the play-mechanics, social structures, and paratexts associated with endgame progression.

Rae (R), a middle-aged IT worker, was the only female participant in the study. R could be described as an intermediate player, taking part in light raiding and dungeons, however she is also the most social of the interviewees. R spoke about several occasions when she travelled into the United States, specifically Detroit and Philadelphia, to meet face to face with friends she had met in WoW, even going so far as to choose which university to attend based on its proximity to her online friend group. As such R provides an invaluable counterpoint to the traditionally male-dominated user perspective.

Devin (D) is the most communally invested of the participants, being actively involved in a successful raiding and progression guild. D, also a young male university student, is an advanced or hardcore player, investing a minimum of 9

hours a week in high-end raids alone. In addition to participating in raids, D is a central member of his guild having been part of the community for over 2 years. In this regard D was able to provide insights on leadership and social hierarchy as well gameplay and user agency. Interestingly, D is also one of the few participants who is currently raiding through progression whereas many of the other interviewees have retired from endgame raiding for various reasons.

In contrast to the highly social play of R and D, participant Karl (K) engages with the game in a largely insular manner. K, a casual gamer primarily involved in questing and levelling, treats the game largely as a single-player experience, investing as little as possible in online communities and seeking out other players only when in need of assistance. K states that he hardly uses any paratexts and is not involved in any kind of endgame raiding or progression. Over the course of the interview it is also revealed that K has been deceived and defrauded on more than one occasion while playing WoW. This is perhaps a contributing factor regarding his negative outlook on game communities as a whole.

Hector's (H) style of play and motivations are similar to K, though considerably more xenophobic. H actively attempts to avoid interaction with other players unless absolutely necessary, and sees little value in forming game communities or other online relationships. This is particularly evident in his views on paratexts, which he believes to be frivolous expressions of user boredom.

Logan (L), a former WoW player, was once a highly competitive raider investing 8-10 hours a day in progression and endgame content. While L played for several years, he eventually found that he could not maintain such a rigorous

schedule in addition to working a part-time job and taking post-secondary courses. Though he no longer plays WoW, L still retains contact with many members of his old guild community.

The participant Samuel (S) is unique in that he was the only interviewee to focus almost exclusively on PvP (player versus player) activities. Given the individualistic nature of PvP, S faces less pressure in terms of guild commitments and regimented schedules, however considerably more in terms of maintaining his public ranking and title. His guild community is small and highly social, a considerable shift from the enormous, task-oriented guilds of most endgame raiders. As an advanced PvP player, S provides an endgame experience that is remarkably different from most advanced raiders in terms of goal value and community involvement.

Braden (B) is one of the most accomplished participants in terms of endgame content and guild involvement, however he also appeared to be the most embittered. A recent university graduate in his early twenties, B had previously played in one of the top 50 worldwide guilds participating in endgame raiding and progression. Moreover he was an avid PvP player and attained the highest possible ranking in the game. Yet the experience left him “burnt out” (B, Interview) and exhausted by the constant demands of the top-tier guild community. Discouraged by what he now believes was largely a waste of his time; B rarely plays WoW anymore.

The final participant, Max (M), is an active WoW player and former endgame raider. M is notable in that he has played WoW consistently since its initial release in 2007 and is thus fully familiar with the multitude of changes, revisions, and user

innovations that have been incorporated into the game. While not currently as involved with endgame raiding as he once was, M maintains close ties with his online guild community and friend groups.

The participants thus represent a wide spectrum of gaming communities and player types. While in many cases their testimonies overlap, there are indeed stark differences in terms of goal value and perceived agency. This is particularly evident when comparing the responses of advanced players such as D or L, to casual gamers such as K and H. The data as a whole provides a rich tapestry of compelling narratives and candid commentaries on the everyday experience of living in the virtual world. Following the interviews, the responses from all participants were coded to determine which aspects of the game were most compelling or generated concern. The following themes were distilled from the trends which emerged from the coding process, looking at how widely used the terms were but also the circumstances and context in which users described them. The themes thus represent the issues and concepts which arose most frequently from the discussion of game aspects and experiences, providing a glimpse into the participants' perceptions of paratexts, innovation, and the role of users in the game. As such 4 identifiable themes emerged which nearly all participants converged on:

1. The game itself is continuously balanced, adjusted, and perfected by both the actions of the developer as well as through the continuous input of the player community.

2. Endgame content and progression require an enormous amount of player investment, such that many users will not experience the final stages of the game unless they are prepared to thoroughly commit to their online communities.
3. Paratexts such as user-made databases, wiki articles, videos, and add-on programs contribute immensely to the gaming experience and in cases of endgame raiding, are considered necessary texts in terms of instruction and social capital.
4. The game has become progressively easier since its 2004 inception, while some argue that this democratizes the game, others maintain that it simply panders to the needs of the casual gamer.

4.2 Balance, Development, and User-Input

The issue of balance as it pertains to gameplay, socialization, and innovative freedom was addressed by several of the participants. While largely enacted through developer implementations and patch changes, balance and the near infinite amount of adjustments required to keep the game viable are also attributed to the constant stream of feedback, advice, and complaints of the user community. In terms of gameplay, balance is critical to ensuring that the game is fair to all players and more importantly, equally rewarding to all styles of play. M describes the game environment as tumultuous, with developers constantly tuning the game to the needs of the user community, "...it's almost like the squeaky wheel gets the oil, its almost like people go through phases where warriors are underpowered then they're overpowered then they're underpowered... and they're bouncing the game

around PvP and PvE right” (M, Interview). M brings up the notion that users play an extended role in determining the success of gameplay modifications, expressing their approval or rejection of instituted changes and constantly pressuring developers to find the perfect balance in designing gameplay elements and power structures. Moreover M notes that the concept of balance is made even more complex by the existence of multiple styles of play. PvP, which stands for player versus player, is markedly different from player versus environment (PvE) in terms of goals, strategy, and user motivation. Indeed AI controlled monsters, which typically overpower the user through sheer statistical superiority, present entirely different challenges than the intuitive and unpredictable human adversaries found in PvP arenas. As such optimizing the game mechanics for both of these scenarios can be an intricate and tenuous affair. Yet despite the immense complexities of balancing such an interdependent gameplay ecology, users from both the PvP and PvE camps have stated that the game manages to remain for the most part, acceptably fair to all parties, “...honestly it is so hard to balance a game, it’s ridiculous right, and there’s proof that this game is as balanced as can be” (S, Interview). The proof that S speaks of in this case is the equal distribution of character classes among top ranked PvP positions, indicating that no class has any apparent advantage over the others. This trend is similarly reflected among top ranked PvE players.

Following the supposition that the game is tempered through the contribution of millions of users, the question arises of how this information makes its way to developers. The explanation put forward by the majority of participants is

that it simply travels through the official game forums. L remarks on the popularity of forums among users themselves, “Back in Vanilla [1st incarnation of WoW] the forums were crazy, like they were, everyone looked at the forums... everyone from the realm would check it daily you know, and post, from work or something, and just talk you know” (L, Interview). L’s quote illustrates that the forums played a key role in building realm wide communities, both in terms of offering help to other users as well as providing a venue for idle chatter and social bonding. However a considerable amount of forum discussion also focused on technical issues, bugs, and perceived imbalances in gameplay, “...people would use the official forums to complain, um, some people feel ignored or nerfed [weakened] and sometimes people get a blue post, there are blue posters [Blizzard development team] and if you get a blue poster on your thread then that’s meaningful” (M, Interview). The blue posts which M refers to are members of the Blizzard development staff who are responsible for implementing changes to the game through patches and updates as well as responding to user issues which come up in the forums. This reverence for development team posts demonstrates that users are not only aware that the forums are actively monitored, but may even be seeking the attention of development team members. Interaction between the staff and users on the forums is not uncommon and often “blue posters” (M, Interview) will appear on comment threads to answer questions, respond to user demands, and even defend their implementation choices. In this regard the forums represent the most direct link between users and developers and indeed the most logical path for the flow of ideas and innovations, however dispute remains over the efficacy of forums in terms of

producing salient gameplay changes. M expresses hesitation when asked about the functional benefits of forums, “I would say Blizzard probably does read its forums but I’m not entirely sure like, I know people do influence the developers but I’m not [sure] to what... I know if you hear enough people whining... then you do something about it, so” (M, Interview). Several other participants share M’s apprehension, undoubtedly the forums allow for some amount of communication with developers however measuring the degree to which forum contributions translate into discernable changes within the game presents a sizeable quandary. Yet some interviewees have suggested a more positive outlook on forums and their ability to impact the direction of the game, “yeah definitely, there have been a lot of things that have come out of the forums, transmogrification, where you can make your gear look like something else, um, was an idea from another game actually and then people whined long and hard enough and it came in, there’s been other things as well,” (D, Interview). D draws attention to specific game functions and services that have been introduced as a direct result of forum initiatives. Indeed several innovations such as the afore-mentioned transmogrification, as well as cross-server services and other social networking capabilities can trace their origins to the clamor of forum appeals. The introduction of these social functions is especially enticing to L, who maintains that it is the constant expansion, reinvention, and identification of user’s social requirements that keeps the game relevant,

“I’m really, I guess you could say glad or happy with the way that Blizzard has handled the social aspect of the game, you know its like, games before WoW... they never had the, in my eyes at least they never had the social aspect that WoW does, I find that Blizzard did an amazing job introducing guilds and the way you could talk to other people... and even recently they released the Real ID feature you know, which means that if someone is

playing Starcraft 2 and you've got them on Real ID, and you're playing WoW you can still talk to each other, over chat which is crazy, or even, now they've introduced a way to... play battle grounds or do dungeons with people that aren't even on the same server as you, I think that was released honestly like 2 months ago, if that... they've pretty much done everything possible to increase the social aspect of WoW in my eyes." (L, Interview)

Conversely, S remarks that while the forums do facilitate some level of user-developer interaction, their overall productivity is limited by the sheer volume of users flooding the system, "I have stumbled upon so many things like I wish this was better, I wish we didn't have to do this, and there just isn't a good enough way to get to Blizzard for that, the only thing they have are the suggestion forums, and that's like, thousands of people spamming all the time... so, there isn't a legitimate way to get feedback unless you go on the suggestion forums and you do get looked at," (S, Interview). The reservations expressed by S do hold some validity as other interviewees have noted that the forums can serve as both hotbeds of senseless online bickering as well as crucibles of innovation. Efficacy arguments aside, most participants agreed that the user forums were at least partly responsible for many of the adjustments and changes required to keep the game functional and rewarding. In this regard the forums are described as duplicitous in nature, capable of sustaining meaningful dialogue between users and developers, but also of drowning out productive user input and soaking up developer resources, "I think the forums are a useful tool if they're utilized in their correct form, if it's just about whining nothing is ever going to get done but if it's constructive and there's valid points to what they're posting yeah they could definitely be used to change the face of the game." (D, Interview). In returning to the notion of balance, it seems evident that the forums are at least one of the methods utilized by developers in

determining the direction of the game. While most participants agreed that balanced game design demands a collaborative effort, they seemed confident that WoW had at least considered the needs of their immense user base, "I'm not sure, they just have the equation right, they have everything right, perfect. Even though all those other ones [games] pretty much follow WoW's layout, it's still just not the same." (Z, Interview).

4.3 The Exclusivity of Endgame Content and Communities

Perhaps the most widely agreed upon issue across all participants was that progression and endgame raiding require a considerable amount of commitment and gaming expertise. The term progression in this sense refers to completing the highest available content as it is being released by developers, but also competing with other users to be the first to defeat the newest monsters and bosses. Endgame raids refer to the completion of high level dungeons which may yield the best available equipment and special titles. Indeed while endgame content is often deemed the most rewarding in terms of challenge and in-game items, it is also the most difficult aspect of the game to participate in as it requires not only impeccable gaming performance but also a dedicated community group and extended knowledge networks. One might find it peculiar that the game developers would make their prime content so inaccessible to the casual gamer however in many cases it seems the prestige and exclusivity of taking part in endgame raids is precisely what makes them so alluring, "I always say the game starts once you get to level 85, until then you're just filling time cause once you get to 85 it's like, the whole amount of time it took you to get to 85 again, just to get into a situation where

you're able to raid," (T, Interview). Endgame raiding is thus viewed as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the game, but also the most resource intensive and draining as it hinges on fulfilling one's obligations to their raid community, T describes the responsibilities of a raid guild as akin to a sports team, "I would treat it like agreeing to play on a sports team. Like you know if you join an ultimate Frisbee team and you agree to play every Wednesday, well you better be there because your team may not need you there but you made a commitment so you better follow through with it," (T, Interview). While some users would be reluctant to assign the same imperative to a gaming community as they would a flesh and blood sports team, many of the participants with experience in endgame raiding guilds confirm that the commitment level goes far beyond a recreational sport, bordering on the level of a part-time job,

"...it was close to, close to 8-10 hours a day, you know going through progression and stuff... the guild I was in we were doing progression we were trying to get the top 50 of US and so with that kind of want, you really need to put a lot of time into progression and you needed to put a lot time into you know just sitting there and raiding and hopefully downing the boss and that so, yea I spent a lot of time probably close to 8-10 hours a day," (L, Interview)

While L's account of life in a raiding community may sound extreme, it is corroborated by other participants who have shared similar experiences and reaffirm the high-stress atmosphere of top-tier guild participation, "I was in it for 6 months until I got burnt out, it was brutal, it was practically a second full time job, I was going to school and doing a part time job then coming home and after that I gotta raid from 6 in the evening until about 11 o'clock at night, and that was just doing content, that wasn't counting the weekend and other times trying to farm for

equipment, farm for potions, flasks,” (B, Interview). Moreover raid guilds can also be highly exclusive, carefully managing who they accept in an effort to accrue applicants who will provide the most benefit to the guild and raid team. M describes the severity of the guild vetting process, “I’ve filled out long applications where it’s like, asking, almost like your applying for a job... I mean that is interesting in that the top end guilds they really thoroughly screen who gets in and whatnot,” (M, Interview). While these applications often contain clauses on mandatory raid hours and performance standards, they are also used to determine whether applicants are socially compatible with the group. As L remarks, group dynamics and “synergy” (L, Interview) play a large role in determining whether a raid community will be successful, “it’s like every group has their own synergy I guess you could say so if you want to be able to just go to another group you’re going to have to take a while to learn how they raid and learn what they expect,” (L, Interview). Raid communities thus represent the pinnacle of gaming commitment and success, while endgame raiders pay a heavy toll in terms of personal investment and communal responsibility, they are rewarded with the best items, achievements, and even fame amongst their peers, “I would always walk around [and] people always send me tells [private messages] here and there when I’m in random PUG groups saying how lucky I am that I’m in this guild and that they would kill to be in this guild, it’s kind of almost like being a little celebrity,” (B, Interview).

Not surprisingly, endgame raiding is not a viable option for the majority of players. Given the intense degree of commitment and time required, raiding and progression is usually only sustainable for relatively short periods of time or under

circumstances when users are particularly unencumbered. Often endgame raiders will reach a critical stress level when the rewards are outweighed by the commitments and simply “burn out” (B, Interview). L describes how his heavy involvement in the raid community eventually began to impact his offline lifestyle,

“When I was playing you know 8 to 10 hours a day I wasn’t going to school or I wasn’t working you know and eventually that just got too much in real life, I mean I couldn’t afford to do certain things with my friends anymore that I wanted to and so, I went and found a job and then I started going back to school this year, and so, it definitely, I felt the burden of the online commitment... when I wasn’t working or when I didn’t have any commitments in real life it was completely fine to me you know, I was, I was fine with that commitment but then like I said it got a little too much.” (L, Interview)

This pattern of binge and burn play appears common amongst most endgame raiders, with nearly all of the advanced users in the participant group admitting to some degree of over-exhaustion or undue stress. For most it is the pressure of attempting to balance one’s offline obligations with their duties to the raid community which bars them from experiencing endgame content. In this regard, M elaborates on how his own particular circumstances allowed him to access the upper echelons of the game,

“Just to reveal a bit of my history I have a bit of bi-polar so I get disability so that’s what’s enabled me to be such a hardcore player, [it] is because I’ve been able to play and not work. I don’t know if I would have been able to maintain the hardcore lifestyle if I had to work 40 hours a week and play so I found some people, they’re housewives or for some reason live with their parents, that can facilitate a hardcore lifestyle of playing Warcraft.” (M, Interview)

M’s testimony is revealing and illustrates the level of commitment required to fully engage with the guild community, but also the tenuous relationship between endgame raiding and maintaining a balanced lifestyle.

Undoubtedly the strict regulations and performance pressures associated with participating in raiding guilds can cause considerable friction between members. While a rigid hierarchy of leadership and organization is one of the key strengths of raiding communities, it can also lead to runaway egos and harassment of lower level members, as noted by B, “You gotta listen, you gotta deal with a lot of, sometimes abuse, because these guys take their content very seriously and they also take the standings very seriously... so you gotta deal with the pressure aspect” (B, Interview). S shares similar views on the stresses and anxieties of participating in a raid community, when asked why he prefers PvP he affirms that much of his distaste for raiding stems from the oppressive nature of raid communities, “Yea it’s a lot more freedom, like you play the game how you want to play, like, I don’t like gaming when I’m told, you must have this many flasks before raiding or you will get kicked you know... I can’t do that,” (S, Interview) For some, the stress of a belligerent guild community in addition to the pressures and time commitments of the game can be the final straw in deciding to leave the endgame raiding scene. L brings up the interesting point that the amount of time raid communities can spend together online is comparable to a part-time job (8-10 hours every few days), as such guild communities may become more akin to hostile work environments rather than the captivating virtual worlds they began as. As such when community bonds implode they tend to collapse in spectacular fashion, “I quit raiding, cause I hated it, I hated the people and I hated being around these egotistical people that think they’re the best, above everybody else because they have the best gear in the game and I just didn’t like that.” (B, Interview)

Interestingly, the pressures of endgame progression are not limited to raiders. In contrast to endgame raiding communities, endgame PvP places more individualized stress on advanced users. Although endgame PvP does not make users beholden to a guild community in the same way as raiding, it does place demands on the user to maintain a certain level of proficiency at all times, lest they lose their public standing,

“You need at least, about 10, 000 to 15,000 points a week accumulation to move up and that was about running 4 hours a day. And once you move up to anything past rank 10, anything 11 to 14 required about 500,000 to a million, so I was putting in about 12 hours a day of grueling PvP grinding, nonstop,” (B, Interview)

B’s description of endgame PvP is intense to say the least. While lacking the social investment and ties of raid communities, PvP places immense pressure on the individual to pour long hours into the game, sometimes with disastrous consequences, “If you didn’t reach a certain rank you [would] get pushed down and someone else would get ahead of you and you would usually lose your rank and fall off the map... some days I would stay up for 3 to 4 days straight just trying to get it, drinking red bulls and taking ADHD drugs just to stay awake” (B, Interview).

Undoubtedly this kind of zealous devotion to the game is not typical of most users and as such casual users rarely obtain the achievements and titles of advanced PvP players. However even for the most devout of endgame PvP’ers, this kind of mania eventually becomes crippling, destroying any kind of fulfillment or joy initially provided by the experience,

“When I played in Burning Crusade [2nd installment of WoW] we were like, rank 1 in Rated Battle Ground [RBG] and we’re like ah we gotta keep the rank 1 up, gotta get rank 1 Gladiator and it’s like c’mon who cares... that’s when it wasn’t fun anymore but like that, and the stress... after a while like no one

cares, I don't care anymore, so back then it really, it does stress you out, I think there's this huge stress factor to the game if you don't learn to play properly you can get stressed out, it can start affecting your real life." (S, Interview)

Given the intense demands of guild life, the strict adherence to raid commitments and playing conventions, and the tremendous mental and physical fatigue associated with dedicated endgame play, one is left to wonder what the benefits are of subscribing to such a lifestyle. While the material trappings of endgame play such as equipment, titles, and loot, constituted one rewarding aspect, for many it was simply the competitive nature of top tier play. Endgame play whether through PvP or PvE, is both highly exclusive and competitive, be it jockeying for a position on a raid team or battling other users in arenas. S describes how his own personality and past accomplishments helped to form his WoW habits, "I'm very competitive about everything I do, like I ran track in high school and I ran [university level] track and I guess I'm competitive and it just seemed like a competitive thing to do [PvP] in the game" (S, Interview). L describes similar motivations, adding that once he could no longer commit the time and energy required to remain competitive, his interest in the game began to fade,

"The way I look at raiding especially in WoW was it was fun, but I'm a very competitive person myself so it was lot more competitive than fun, and so when I couldn't have that competitive aspect anymore in my life I found that the fun was also taken away from it so I was like, if I can't be competitive or if I don't have the drive to be competitive I find that yea, I was like it wasn't fun for me anymore so I had to call it quits on that." (L, Interview)

For others it is the sense of community forged through the constant pressure and long hours of raiding which provide the most fulfillment. While raid guilds can be aggressive and contemptuous of lower level players, they are also closely knit

social groups, bonded through mutual interdependency, trust and in some instances, genuine friendship,

“The people that I’ve formed the friendships with, they know who I am, they know details about my life, what I’m doing, um they’ve got ways to contact me if there’s anything and I can get hold of them as well, um, the atmosphere really, honestly, you walk around and it’s just like, you walk into a bar with your friends and they all say hi and everything.” (D, Interview)

While D’s account of guild life is perhaps more optimistic than those provided by some of the other participants, he touches on an aspect of WoW which has proved alluring to many different player groups. The attraction of belonging to a larger community, contributing to a common goal, and cultivating online relationships has been a theme common to several participants. Whether these virtual communities exist for endgame performance, online socialization, or even immersive escapism, they appear to heavily influence the way in which users engage with the game, “If you have a good group then yeah it’s really fun and you have one person doing their job and you have your own job... yeah, just being part of something bigger than just yourself” (Z, Interview).

4.4 The Role of Paratexts

Paratexts, a blanket term encompassing all manner of user-generated materials including item databases, wiki articles, YouTube videos, add-on programs, and even fan fictions, were largely agreed to be an integral component of the gaming experience. While these resources are external to the game, having been created by users rather than the official game developers, they nonetheless deal primarily with the technical aspects and mechanics of the game. Item databases for example, range from simple lists describing in-game armor and statistics to highly complex

calculators that can determine your armor value, strength relative to other players, and suggest upgrades particular to your role in group play. Paratexts can also be used to augment the narrative of the game and compile detailed volumes of game lore and mythology. Collectively paratexts represent an immense body of work created by users with little incentive other than enriching the game experience,

“I think the beauty of WoW is the narrative that’s created outside the game, you know, like the connections people make and the relationships that they build. And then on top of that the blogs that they write, the wiki pages that they tap up, so that people know how to get every single quest done, and the strategy guides that exist on like what’s the best possible build for each class” (T, Interview)

T identifies one aspect of paratext usage as the optimization of personal performance via learning class mechanics. Commonly termed “theorycraft” (Paul, 2012, para. 2), it requires learning how to utilize all of the skills and abilities of a certain class to their maximum effect. As actually engaging in theorycraft can be incredibly tedious and time consuming, several participants state that they frequent user-made websites and wikis to quickly obtain the latest news on theory and strategy, “The one I use a lot is Elitist Jerks [paratext website], their forum for resources and stuff, every time I’m on a new alt [alternative character] I’m like how do I play this character? Check EJ! ...They have really good forums for, how to spec, how to play, you know, five minutes on EJ and you can play like you know the class,” (R, Interview). Similarly, L comments that in addition to endgame raiding, much of his time was devoted to researching theory to maximize his performance and secure his position on the raid team, “Huge part of my gaming experience was like ...either watching YouTube videos about killing a boss or on elitist jerks trying to theorycraft my way into finding the best DPS for a hunter, you know, so I could be the top of the

top,” (L, Interview). Paratexts in this regard are viewed as central to gameplay and performance, they are in many ways the real instruction manual of the game written through the collaborative efforts of countless users. S identifies strongly with this notion, commenting that the resources and information provided through paratexts play a necessary role in educating the average user on the mechanics and processes of the game,

“If you don’t learn to manage your time with the game or if you don’t learn to you know, invest your time in the proper places, or care about the proper things you can go the wrong way really fast... You just keep doing the same thing wrong, like in raids if you just keep doing the same thing wrong you just get frustrated with it you spend more time trying to fix it but you just never identify your mistake ...if you don’t learn to deal with it or manage your time properly you can play it wrong, that’s what I like to call it you play the game wrong, you’re doing it wrong [laugh].” (S, Interview)

S remarks that without adequate instruction, one can easily learn to play the game “wrong” (S, Interview) and invest time in fruitless endeavours. Questioned further on how one would learn to play the game correctly, S advocated the use of paratexts and user-made content, adding that there is no functional equivalent in terms of official game media or resources, “...3rd party resources, like online there’s guild chat there’s arena junkies there’s all those forums right, you can read up on those, but there’s no such thing like that in the game” (S, Interview). Several participants shared similar views, putting the onus on users to create their own knowledge networks. However there was some divide among participants as to which aspects of paratext usage contributed most to gameplay.

The majority of advanced users stated that paratexts were crucial to endgame raiding and guild performance, particularly in the areas of theorycraft and strategy, “you know top tier, top [expletive] guilds you know, they are definitely like,

100 percent all about theory, you know they will sit there and just do theory 2 weeks before they even go into a raid, cause that's, if you're able to have the best theory there and go in you'll be the first to down it, so, yea, it's very necessary" (L, Interview). These sentiments were echoed by other participants who viewed paratexts as an invaluable preparation tool adding that while it did require additional time to research certain game mechanics and boss strategies, the effort was well worth it, akin to studying up before an important exam or doing homework to improve one's grades,

"It does add quite a bit of time, if you're spending ten minutes per video watching a boss kill you know, and then you're re watching it 5-6 times just to figure out what was going on, that's like an hour right there, or if you're sitting there trying to figure out the best way to get the top DPS I find it does add a lot of, a lot of minutes to your gameplay, its, and I don't really consider it work but I almost consider it homework, like if you want to do better in school you do homework if you want to do better in WoW you do homework you know," (L, Interview)

Similarly, D described paratext usage as comparable to the time invested in any other offline hobby, "It's no longer than reading a regular article on a web page it's no longer than setting up a fantasy hockey team, I wouldn't say it's any longer than something you would watch a half hour TV show for, it just requires a little bit of effort and a little bit of knowledge," (D, Interview). For others paratext databases offered immediate solutions to technical questions without the hassle of trial and error or the tedium of lengthy forum debate, "I find the people who post the main posts, original posts. I don't really go through the threads afterwards, all the people arguing about the tidbits of theory crafting, like I don't really care just tell me the answer!" (R, Interview). D, being a raid leader and authority figure within his guild, found that the extensive knowledge provided through paratexts, particularly

knowledge of other classes, was a key factor in garnering social capital (Bourdieu, 1984/2000) and retaining his position in the guild hierarchy, “I’d say it’s a big part of it because if you don’t know what you’re talking about, if you don’t know your classes and you don’t know specs and rotations enough to have a discussion with somebody then you can’t be that go to person cause they can’t respect the decisions that you make or the advice that you have...” (D, Interview). D’s remarks reflect the tenuous balance of guild society and the continual need to remain informed and relevant in upper management positions. Conversely, some participants stated that they enjoyed paratexts simply for the entertainment value of the extended community and the ability to contribute to an ever-expanding cultural sphere, “I mean the sites I visit mainly, there’s MMO champion which is really good for news and then there’s WoW insider... and then I have YouTube channels, there’s one called TradeChat with a gal who has funky pink hair these days, but she does WoW videos and um, what also is interesting is there’s this site called Warcraft Movies... there’s some real people who put good time into making good Warcraft based videos and it’s called machinima” (M, Interview). While M does make use of typical paratext functions like theorycraft, he is also engrossed in the larger miasma of WoW based Internet culture. Talk shows, narrative forums, even full length machinima films are all necessary elements of WoW paratexts which breathe life into an otherwise lifeless game, “I don’t think that WoW has been so strong as a franchise because of the game itself, I think they’ve gotten people really caught up and strung out on these ideas of social networks that cannot be unbound” (T, Interview).

4.4.1 Add-ons

Aside from the more passive forms of paratext such as wiki's and strategy guides, add-ons are a much more active product of user innovation. Add-ons are programs created by users that augment the user interface of the game in various ways. Certain add-ons may track the damage statistics of party members to provide information on who is contributing the most to the group, while others are designed to produce visual cues and tips while fighting major raid bosses. In this regard add-ons are user created innovations that provide some form of advantage or beneficial service not provided through the official game interface. As a paratext they form an important part of the gaming experience, with many participants stating that they would not want to play without them, "Early on I didn't really know much about add-ons but nowadays, I probably wouldn't want to play without add-ons... If I'm doing normal raiding, every edge, I'll take every advantage I can get really" (M, Interview). Other advanced participants such as B go further in saying that add-ons have become a necessary part of high level and endgame play, and that some of the feats performed by top tier players could not be accomplished without the aid of these user-created programs, "...It made them better, and more reliant on them. Because it allowed me... to heal individuals that I wouldn't or couldn't be able to [heal] on my own reflexes," (B, Interview). Add-ons are thus creating a new class of gaming elite, in that they allow certain users to react faster and more precisely than their un-augmented peers. They have also become a normalized aspect of the game, with many game communities requiring that users utilize certain add-on programs before they are admitted into the group. B remarks how raiding guilds will often

refuse admission to users who do not have the appropriate add-ons, “Yea know the boss, know the fight, know my role, know the certain programs that I needed to get, and [are] required, that were mandatory... I used Curse Serve, I used Boss Mod, I used, um Click Heal, I used... Heal Finder,” (B, Interview). In addition to performance add-ons other 3rd party programs were often a requirement in raiding parties such as Ventrilo, a voice-over-IP program which makes communication much faster. Despite the fact that many raid guilds require add-ons, some participants such as S maintained that add-ons were merely a fall-back device or safety net and that if given adequate instruction, users could perform the same tasks without having to rely on complex add-on programs,

“Well its like, I’d say its handholding, cause its just a [safety net], I bet you if you introduced this add-on to a person that couldn’t raid before, like here’s the raid mod, and he raids the whole dungeon with this CT raid mod, and the next time he goes in they pull the CT raid mod, I bet you 80% of what he learned through the mod he would take that on” (S, Interview)

Add-ons were viewed with similar ambivalence by other participants who believed that they were useful to have in terms of gameplay, yet resented being forced to implement them in order to join certain guilds or game groups. Perhaps one of the more interesting issues to come out of add-on usage is the phenomenon of co-veillance. With the advent of complex monitoring add-ons, users now have the capacity to carefully survey each other in group scenarios, ostracizing non-contributors and identifying top players. M notes how the game has changed considerably from its original incarnation, particularly with regard to tracking players in large raid groups,

“It was very hard, but you know add-ons have gotten so sophisticated that you can track heals per second, DPS [damage per second], who died, why

they died, like that's the one thing that's differentiated WoW is the customizability of their UI and XML and your ability to download add-ons, user interfaces, that can do all sorts of things" (M, Interview)

While the development of advanced tracking software tends to appeal to users driven by competition such as L and S, it has also created a panoptic environment where every misstep and fault of the user can be clearly seen. B notes that this is particularly apparent in high level raid groups where users are actively monitored by guild officers, "[I] also had to accept criticism from my officers about what I'm doing right, what I'm doing wrong, its almost like you can compare it to running your own business where you get corporate meetings or you get performance reviews about what are you doing good, what are you doing bad... its practically being in a business," (B, Interview). While co-veillance undoubtedly has some negative connotations, it has nonetheless become an integral part of the game. Indeed theorycraft, PvP videos, and numerous other paratexts have stemmed from the ability to monitor and compete with online peers. For many the aspect of competition itself is what makes the game so appealing and at times even addictive, "I mean, it's a thrill, if I ever top the charts it's a thrill!" (M, Interview).

4.5 Diluting the Game

The final theme to come out of the data focused on the perceived dilution or amelioration of the game. Nearly every participant agreed that over the course of its 8-year operation, WoW has become progressively less challenging, more socially oriented, and increasingly user friendly. For the majority of participants who considered themselves casual gamers, this was viewed as an effort to make the game more accessible to a wider user base, "They've actually designed it so you can

level up easier... before you actually had to go and do the same, the same battleground 2 or 3 times before you move up a level, now they've actually designed it where you get more experience" (K, Interview). K comments on the compression of gameplay which WoW has gradually introduced as an appeal to the casual user, "In that regard it's a lot easier or a lot less time consuming whereas I'm sure 90% of the population doesn't have time to spend 5 hours playing a game just to do one level," (K, Interview). Advanced users have noted the acceleration of gameplay as well, particularly when comparing the current rate at which raid groups can be assembled versus the lengthy wait times which were a hallmark of 2004 era WoW,

"I mean, like, the scene's really changed from the old WoW when it was first released compared to now, like back when it was first released, when I was in a raiding guild back then it was most the time just kind of hanging out because you needed 40 people to commit time so it was hard to find those 40 people that would show up at certain times, but now cause you only need 10 people to commit to raiding... you know you could commit a lot more time to actual raiding than just sitting around and doing nothing in the game." (L, Interview)

One of the most dramatic changes in terms of gameplay came with the introduction of dungeon tools or finders. Whereas users were originally required to seek-out group members through chat channels if they wanted to play through a dungeon, users can now click a dungeon finder button and have their team automatically assembled for them. Further developments have allowed dungeon finders to operate across several servers, bringing together users who would ordinarily never interact. While this function greatly expedites the grouping process, it has also diminished many social elements of the game,

"Yeah I think I found it more engaging trying to seek people out who were around the same level as you... actually being questing in an area, immersed in the environment, and then finding other people who, according to this

fantasy world, are also facing similar challenges as opposed to just breaking it down to such a numbers game which is what I feel it became at the later levels you know. But yea, so I think it was almost more social to not have those queue ups, like you were forced to be more engaged in the human presence rather than just a bunch of people looking for a particular number to fill a particular spot.” (T, Interview)

T laments the loss of kinship and social engagement that accompanied the implementation of dungeon finders. Indeed many of the participants have noted that the game has evolved to favour functional but ephemeral, task-oriented groups rather than the lasting communities of its earlier halcyon,

“It really made the game, not so, how would I word this, not as dependent on the community I guess you could say, I found that... back in the days of vanilla WoW there was no such thing as a group finder so you had to go on to global chat and be like hey I’m looking for, you know, one more person to do this but that got really inconvenient for people so people would just start making guilds and inviting people into the guilds that would want to do that kind of stuff... but you know with the group finder you don’t even need to be in a guild to do it, it’s like a one click button you know... And eventually they released cross realm dungeon finders which means that another person from another realm that you can’t even add as a friend or you can’t even really whisper them, you can only talk in party chat to them... and with that introduced I mean that brought, it just completely shut down any chance of community you know to create some sort of friendship you know, cause you meet someone that’s from another realm and yeah maybe you guys have good time during the dungeon or something but after the dungeon you can’t add them you know, you can’t talk to them you know it’s like a one shot thing.” (L, Interview)

In this regard the trade-off between communal engagement and functional pacing has deeply affected the dynamics of play. Having played the game steadily since its launch in 2004, M remarks that what dungeon finders have diminished in terms of socialization, they have more than compensated for in terms of expediency, “Well I found putting together a group without a queuing system was very stressful... and if the group wasn’t going well people would leave and then you’re out in a dungeon... yeah I mean, its very instant gratification” (M, Interview). M is

not the only one to notice that contemporary WoW has become more focused on immediate rewards. As a relatively casual player, K relishes the brisk pace of contemporary WoW, “I think it’s gotten more easy and manageable compared to before... they [Blizzard] clustered people together with the same time frame and the same attitudes so you can do your raiding, get a couple levels a day, and move on with the rest of your week” (K, Interview).

While developers have made many changes to the play mechanics of WoW, they have also introduced several user-generated innovations to the official UI of the game. Add-ons, user-created programs which alter game aesthetics or modify existing functions, have been utilized by players since the earliest incarnations of the game. As these add-ons have grown in complexity and popularity, many of their features have been adopted by Blizzard,

“Blizzard is constantly updating their UI with more of these things, because if you looked like 2 years ago none of these add-ons were available that are available now in the Blizzard UI, like you didn’t have your classes pop up when you enter an arena match, now Blizzard has the 3 classes that pop up in the right side of your screen and they have cast bar as well, you didn’t have any of that, there’s just things that they’ve added like the map, you know when your questing you can know exactly where the mob is going to be... the game’s gotten easier or I think its, its equal for everybody.” (S, Interview)

The incorporation of these previously unavailable features has undoubtedly made the game easier, more intuitive, and arguably more appealing to the casual gamer. While many participants described the original installment of the game as “unforgiving” (S, Interview), the multitude of tips, UI tools, and visual cues which can be found in contemporary WoW has reduced much of the difficulty, and according to some the fulfillment as well, “...Oh very watered down, now you see every little kid, 14, 13, 15 year olds walking around in epic gear” (B, Interview) .

Despite this perceived “watering-down” (B, Interview), Blizzard seems to have been somewhat successful in identifying the needs and desires of their user base. By observing which tools and features trend in popularity over time, the developer is thus able to discern which add-ons will be most beneficial to implement, S describes the process,

“...In the early stages of the game I think people were always like, man it would be so awesome if I could do this and some dude works on it, comes up with an add-on, gets crazy reviews from all of the communities... and these things somehow end up on the Blizzard suggestion threads because I’m sure Blizzard runs all sorts of research on what people are using, how they can improve the game... so I think that’s part of it, they take these ideas and implement them into the game.” (S, Interview)

The circulation and development of add-ons draw some parallels with Lead User Theory regarding the distribution of technology through key community groups (Hippel, 2005). While the creation of the add-ons can be attributed to key “lead-users”, the online gaming community itself serves as an innovation group, testing, approving, or dismissing potential products. In many cases the final hallmark of success for these products is to be inducted into the official game UI, which Blizzard routinely does. This continual introduction of new features serves to refresh and improve the playing experience however it also allows Blizzard to eliminate compatibility issues and streamline gameplay. Indeed L describes how early add-on use was typically marred by volatile system failures and instabilities, “I used a lot of mods... and with mods always brought problems, like the game would always be shutting down, and this and that,” (L, Interview). Since incorporating add-on features, users are no longer required to use 3rd party software, thus remedying problems around stability and program failure. While this may seem counter-

intuitive to the idea of grassroots innovation, it should be noted that these conventions are drawn directly from existing user-created products and community feedback. In many ways, the incorporation of add-ons into the official UI is an effort to create a more efficient and comfortable gaming environment by tapping the potential solutions provided by the users themselves,

“Sometimes you’re installing these add-ons that have to be updated all the time and they don’t work properly if they’re not updated but now Blizzard has the one massive add-on that will always work and is Blizzard approved and built for the game so people have assurance, so they’re making the game efficient in that sense but I think all of these Blizzard add-ons are absolutely ideas from these other user[s],” (S, Interview)

Aside from add-ons, participants have noticed that the abundance of information and advice in the form of paratexts, forum communities or 3rd party programs have contributed to the progressive amelioration of the game. Over time an immense network of social connections and information-sharing infrastructure has accumulated around the game, opening up a wealth of resources for new users. Moreover progression content is being consumed as quickly as it is being released as top end guilds chew through the newest dungeons and raids at breakneck speed. In this regard it seems that the paratexts responsible for so much of WoW’s appeal are also very quickly diluting the challenge of the game,

“I think the game, people would say [has] progressively gotten easier, um but also the knowledge has gotten easier too, because with internet and with how networked people are, like they come up with new content or a raid, which are like the main focus, and... within a month probably the whole raid has been beat by the hardcore players,” (M, Interview)

Since its inception in 2004 WoW has undergone tremendous changes, both aesthetically and in terms of fundamental game mechanics. Collectively, this multitude of adjustments, modifications, and overhauls have realigned the values of

the game itself, shifting it from a time-consuming, communally oriented virtual space to one more closely resembling a fast-paced, single player experience. Not surprisingly, the participants were divided in their opinion of these changes. While casual users largely found the addition of dungeon finders and other tools to be agreeable with their own playing habits, advanced users were not so appreciative, feeling that they contributed to the deterioration of the community and collapse of the game's reward system.

Though the 10 participants in the study came from varying backgrounds and gaming habits, their combined input provided a detailed profile of how user-innovation had affected the progression of the game at each level of play. While they all provided a unique wealth of insight, expertise, and in many cases candid personal experience, they also gravitated towards the 4 central themes presented in this chapter: that the game is continuously balanced through user and developer actions; that endgame play demands serious commitment and is not experienced by everyone; that paratexts are a necessary part of the gaming experience and culture; and that the game has become progressively more accessible to the casual user. Having now looked at the data provided by the participants, the next step is to examine the relationship between these themes, how they are affected by the user-developer dynamic, and how they are indicative of a new kind of innovation strategy particular to MMO games.

Chapter 5: Analysis

In the previous chapter we saw how 4 salient themes were identified after sifting through extensive amounts of interview data from the 10 participants. While these themes represented topics and issues common to most participants, closer analysis reveals that they are also closely linked to several emergent trends concerning MMO games and online innovation communities. Much of the data focused on how the game had radically changed since its release in 2004 but more importantly how the users had played a major role in influencing the path of development. The data also illustrated the importance of paratext creation and distribution with regards to expanding user interest in the game. The paratexts mentioned by the participants played several roles including building the culture of the game, supplementing the narrative, serving as an educational aid in terms of theory and strategy, and performing various services in the form of add-on programs. These paratexts thus comprise a key component of the game's capacity to not only retain users but also prompt them to invest themselves and innovate new ideas around the existing game technology. Perhaps the most distinctive pattern to emerge from the data was the significance of online community membership, particularly with regard to reaching endgame content. Virtual communities and raid guilds were seen to place unique pressures on their members that had the capacity to galvanize new innovations, forge friendships, or smother users with excessive responsibility. While participants explored both the benefits and drawbacks of guild

life, they were nonetheless adamant that community involvement and socialization were key aspects of the gaming experience.

In unpacking the vast amount of data provided by the participants, I have organized my analysis into 4 sections which bridge the aforementioned data themes with relevant theory and emergent patterns. The first section will focus on *virtual communities as unique innovation communities* as based on the work of Eric Von Hippel (Hippel, 2005). While online innovation communities have been documented in the past, particularly with regard to software development, MMO spaces provide a distinct environment for the exchange of ideas due to the continuous dialogue between developers, users, and lead users. The second section will explore how the *relationship between users and developers* has been affected as the interests of lead users and innovators have diverged from those of the developer. The third section will examine *paratext culture* and how it has affected the innovative capacity of users within the game. This is supported by participant accounts that identify paratexts as being one of the most appealing aspects of gameplay, be it for technical reasons or sheer entertainment. This section will also look at the relationship between paratexts and the online communities that provide the virtual space for these texts to be created, refined, and culturally diffused. Drawing on the work of Rene Glas, it will also look at how community involvement affects the users' fields of negotiation, allowing for the expansion of dialog and exchange among lead users and developers alike. Lastly, the final section will explore the link between *community involvement, user innovation, and MMO development*, primarily how involvement in online communities can apply particular pressures, grant access to

knowledge networks, and open channels of discourse to users which allow for conceptual and technical innovative growth.

5.1 Virtual Spaces Constitute Unique Innovation Communities

In his work *Democratizing Innovation*, Eric Von Hippel examined the role of lead users and coined the term “innovation community” (Hippel, 2005, p. 96). Based on the data provided by the participants, it can be said that MMO environments produce their own unique innovation communities composed of lead users as well as innovators and sometimes developers. These communities can comprise in-game guilds and forum groups, however their boundaries are elastic and often encompass multiple social circles. For example participant M remarked that he was a member of a guild which required certain add-ons and specified knowledge of strategy, however he was also an active participant on forums and independent websites which contributed to the overall growth and distribution of paratexts and other innovations. As such MMO innovation communities can include a diverse collection of individuals connected through one or several communications networks. While Von Hippel states that the refinement of both technique and equipment are integral to user innovation (Hippel, 2005), an inordinate amount of the WoW innovation community tends to focus solely on the development of the former. This can be seen in the vast amount of paratexts devoted to theorycraft, item cataloguing, and instructional video. Although this form of innovation does not generate novel products or tools, it does contribute to the overall growth of knowledge and practice. Not unlike innovation communities in the medical field which pioneered new procedures and policies (Hippel, 2005), MMO communities are continually

testing and compiling new tactics, methods and strategies for overcoming the challenges of the game as well as maximizing user enjoyment and fulfillment. Additionally these communities do participate in the development of new equipment or products in the form of user created add-ons. In this regard, the lead users are not necessarily the creators of the add-ons themselves, but rather the first users to employ said innovations and apply them to game scenarios. Innovation communities thus become the test groups for novel tools and features which may go on to become part of the official game UI if they prove popular enough with the wider user base. This is particularly true of PvP add-ons, which have been largely incorporated into the official game UI as noted by participant S (see page 73). Successful add-ons are first created in response to perceived user needs, diffused throughout the community where they are thoroughly tested and refined, and finally adopted and implemented by the developer. Undoubtedly this is not the case with all add-ons but rather the most enduring and widely used ones.

In looking to add-ons as one of the products of user innovation, MMO groups bear a strong resemblance to the online innovation communities which occur in the open source software industry. Online innovation communities thus differ from their physical counterparts in that their products are largely exempt from the immense costs associated with product development and testing, manufacturing, and distribution (Hippel, 2005). Similarly, MMO communities have free reign to access add-ons and other user created programs at little to no personal cost. Diffusion of products largely takes place through 3rd party websites such as Curse.com which serve as aggregate distribution platforms for a range of add-ons

and services. As such MMO innovators largely allow their products to be “freely-revealed” (Hippel, 2005, p. 81), a practice which eliminates the cost of licensing and maximizes accessibility to the product. While the free-revealing of products remains a common trait of online innovation communities, it provides little direct benefit to the innovators themselves aside from exposure of their work. In terms of MMO communities, it could be said that one of the chief benefits of releasing add-ons to the public is the free labor provided by users who beta test the product to find program bugs and other errors. However innovators can rarely expect monetary compensation for their work, even if Blizzard eventually does adopt their add-on concept. As noted by Von Hippel, the collective action and shared rewards model (Von Hippel, 2005, p. 89) appears to be the driving force behind the release of products in the MMO community as it is in typical online innovations communities. The question thus becomes what characteristics define MMO communities and how are they different from other existing online innovation communities?

While MMO groups share many conventions with typical online innovation communities, they differ primarily in terms of connectivity and member affiliation. As noted previously, MMO innovation groups can include members from several other related communities, these can include guilds, forum groups, or even official developer organizations. As WoW has progressed to encourage communication and socialization with users across multiple channels (i.e. the Real ID feature which allows users to interact across various servers and games), MMO innovation communities have become quite diverse with ill-defined boundaries. MMO groups which utilize the official forums also share a closer than average relationship with

the developer. As noted by participant M (see page 53), Blizzard monitors and often replies to user issues and requests allowing for a higher degree of user-developer interaction and even collaboration. Moreover the majority of participants confirmed that the official forums played a significant role in the gameplay experience and culture, inferring that forum communities are neither inaccessible nor obscure. As such MMO innovation communities can retain strong ties with developers while incorporating a wide range of users from various gaming groups. As these groups can be connected through forum threads, guild posts, Real ID chat, or even personal emails, a multitude of connective channels are available.

While add-ons may be the most explicit product of MMO innovation communities, it should be noted that the vast majority of groups deal largely with knowledge networks and more passive paratexts. As paratexts are the media products which allow for the growth of specialized strategy, culture, and narrative, innovation communities which produce and circulate these texts are engaging in innovation at the level of technique (Hippel, 2005). Moreover these communities are building a complex data infrastructure for the dissemination of knowledge that extends past the boundaries of the core innovation group. By increasing the public accessibility of wikis, videos, and inventories, MMO innovation communities are moving past the relatively enclosed model of online groups put forth by Hippel, and towards a conglomerated innovation network. Indeed much of the reason why the boundaries of MMO innovation groups are so hard to identify is because they are being continually expanded, dissolved, and redefined. The question of how community membership is qualified thus becomes apparent. Is it only direct

innovators and producers that comprise the community, or do we also include lead users who consume the paratexts and add-ons while providing feedback? What about casual users who are not directly involved with the creation of game innovations but make use of the freely revealed products and relay them on to other game players? Hippel's definition of a community involving crews of interconnected individuals sharing specialized knowledge thus fails to capture the scope and intricacy of the MMO innovation group (Hippel, 2005). Given the fluid nature of these online communities it becomes difficult to isolate contained groups, however gameplay style and user investment may provide some measure of distinction.

5.2 The Divergence of Interests Between Advanced Players and Developers

One way to examine the various MMO communities that exist in and around the game is through player investment and community activity. In the data chapter we established that the most active and demanding online communities were those associated with endgame raiding and content. As such it could be said that many members of these communities fulfill the criteria of being lead users in that they remain on the bleeding edge of content release, technique development, and add-on usage. Thus, if we identify the most active online groups as being composed in part of lead-users, we begin to see a divergence of interests between lead users and developers. Indeed many of the participants who were actively involved in endgame raiding communities held mixed to negative feelings about how the game had changed over time to accommodate casual players. Participants who had played the game for several years tended to describe contemporary WoW as less challenging, socially fractured, or simply "watered down" (B, Interview) when compared to its

original incarnation. Moreover they noted a diminished sense of fulfillment and increasingly monotonous gaming experience due in part to the inflation of high end reward items, collapse of stable communities and fast-tracking of game content (L, Interview). In contrast, participants who identified themselves as casual users believed developments such as dungeon finders and faster leveling speeds enhanced their overall enjoyment of the game. These changes allowed users to progress more rapidly and play the game in a style reminiscent of a single player experience, thus reducing their reliance on persistent communities and time commitments (H, Interview).

This stark divergence of opinion between advanced and casual users is indicative of a shifting approach to gameplay on the part of the developer. While Blizzard originally released a game that was much closer to classic MMOs such as Everquest or Ultima Online in terms of difficulty (M, Interview), the challenge and necessary user investment were arguably limiting factors with regard to garnering a large user base. Since its release, WoW has become one of the most widely played MMOs to date, popular with advanced MMO enthusiasts as well as casual users and new gamers. This dichotomy has created an interesting game ecology with significant mediation between these 2 gaming populations. In one camp there are the advanced users, hardcore players, endgame raiders, serious PvP'ers and wider assortment of lead-users who routinely create and use paratexts. While these users generally represent the most active members of the user base, they are by no means the largest. Outnumbering them are a larger body of casual users, new players, first-time MMO gamers, and social gamers, all of which may occasionally use paratexts

but rarely create or contribute to the existing works. From a development standpoint, Blizzard is put in the awkward position of appeasing both camps, each of which having different goals and gameplay styles. While the advanced and lead users typically play the longest and demand the most challenging content, the casual users represent a larger market demographic and likely a more profitable sector given that there are more of them. Given that many of the noted changes to the game itself have focused on reducing the difficulty of the game and speeding up content, it would seem that the developers are leaning more towards pleasing the casual users, much to the chagrin of their long-term advanced user base.

This shift in priority has been met with varying degrees of acceptance from both sides. Some self-identified advanced users felt robbed of their previous accomplishments as in game tasks had become increasingly facile, while others accused Blizzard of diminishing gameplay in favor of increasing subscriptions (B, Interview). As previously mentioned, the collapse of necessary guild structures led the more socially oriented participants to loathe the group-finder tools, though some did recognized the benefits they provided with regard to increasing the rate of play (L, Interview). Much of this is in strong contrast to comments made by casual users who embraced the hurried pace of the game and felt that these developments suited their playing needs adequately (K, Interview). Participants who fell roughly between the advanced users group and the casual demographic tended view the changes to the game in a positive light as well as they were privy to much of the higher end content without the ordeal of subscribing to a serious raiding guild (R, Interview). In this regard it could be said that while recent changes tend to fast-

track players through the early stages of the game, they also expand access to endgame content, breaking the monopoly of high-end raiding guilds and lead user groups. While for much of WoW's operation endgame content was the domain of highly regimented guilds and strict raid teams, moderate players can now experience raids, even if it is for diminished rewards or with a temporary raid team of random players. As such it seems that that development goals of Blizzard are indeed moving away from the ideals of the lead and advanced user base. Though advanced user groups still represent the core of the MMO gaming community, Blizzard appears to be looking to democratize the game on a greater scale and build on its existing demographic of casual users.

5.3 The Necessity and Innovative Capacity of Paratext Culture

As several participants have mentioned, paratexts account for a large part of the gaming experience. Paratexts, primarily wiki's, forums, and videos as well as add-on programs, are part of a massive body of resources which are user-generated, freely distributed, and continually expanding. While they are neither immediately provided nor essential to the game, they have nonetheless become deeply ingrained in the gaming culture to the point of naturalization. Nearly all participants mentioned using some form of paratext, however briefly; moreover, most claimed to have favored certain wikis or forums that they would routinely check. Some participants, such as M, derived considerable enjoyment from the entertainment aspects of paratexts such as machinima movies or YouTube commentaries. Others such as S, used them to hone their skills and observe the "proper" way of playing the game (S, Interview). Still others, like T and L appreciated the capacity for paratexts

to unify and present game narratives, fleshing out the rich mythology of the game and creating a more immersive environment. While all of these processes are external to the mechanics of the game itself, they remain integral to maintaining the interest of the user. As stated by T, much of the game is gruelingly repetitive and monotonous (T, Interview). The paratexts themselves largely serve to interrupt the tedium of the virtual grind by providing shortcuts, effective strategies, or introducing novel gameplay elements. Perhaps the most prominent dynamic brought about through the introduction of paratexts is competition. While users have always competed with each other within the game, paratexts have allowed for the escalation and more importantly, the quantification of inter-user competition through the use of complex damage counters and technical calculators. Damage per second (abbreviated as DPS) can be accurately recorded and analyzed for individual party members, even in large raid groups of up to 30 users. This is made possible through user-created add-ons such as Recount (WowAce, 2012), which provide detailed statistics on user performance. As stated by M, performance-tracking add-ons have reached remarkable heights of sophistication, amplifying user co-veillance and raising the stakes for group play. Raid teams and groups of advanced users often use these tools to evaluate members and may even dictate guild hierarchy based on performance. Furthermore theorycraft has in and of itself become an arena for competition as users generate and publish contested approaches to maximizing DPS or overcoming in-game challenges. Colloquially known as “builds” (WoWWiki, 2012, para. 1), paratexts which map out possible combinations of character abilities and skill sets remain a popular area of interest. While the game mechanics allow for

nearly endless permutations of character abilities, a considerable amount of paratexts are devoted to finding which combinations are optimal for specific scenarios. Factoring in the multitude of changes and statistical adjustments introduced with each new patch and game expansion, the quest to find the perfect character build can be lengthy and laborious but also fulfilling on a competitive level. Given that a large number of participants cited competition as their most powerful motivation for play, it would seem these kinds of paratexts play an influential role in their gaming experience.

The creation and use of paratexts themselves can be related back to Rene Glas' "Battlefields of Negotiation" (Glas, 2010, p. 43), wherein users themselves find new ways to reconfigure and refresh their gaming experience. Glas puts forward 4 main categories or battlefields through which users engage with developers, those being Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture, and Game Contract (Glas, 2010, p. 43). Certain paratexts fall squarely into each category, such as UI add-ons and Game Design, or machinima and Game culture. Still others such as the now defunct Glider add-on take place within the realm of Game Contract, which remains the most contentious of the 4 fields. Collectively however, paratexts permit users to assert themselves in all 4 areas, allowing for the continued evolution of the game. As such paratexts are not simply extraneous pieces of fan culture, but crucial elements of game play which facilitate the continued investment and long-term interest of users. In *Games of Stake*, Glas describes MMO users as stakeholders with each individual contributing to the overall form and capabilities of the game (Glas, 2010). Negotiating power in this regard can reside in the creation and usage of various

paratexts. As such paratexts allow users to assert a form of ownership over the game (Glas, 2010) by offering the means to devise alternative playing styles, provide narrative structure, and even change technical aspects of the game's UI. The vast resources and user networks created through paratext communities also have a sizeable impact on gameplay and game culture allowing users to forge novel communities through forum groups or other non-guild related entities. Lastly as add-ons are eventually incorporated into the official game UI, they begin to affect the game design itself, giving rise to a variety of user influenced features and services. As such it could be argued that as the products of user-innovation and negotiation, paratexts are the tangible results of increasing user agency. They are evidence that users are creating new tools, knowledge, and communities to optimize their own gaming experience but also conversing with developers to change the face of the game. While Glas speaks at length on the interpretive capacity of users to create alternative playing styles and assert ownership over the game, paratexts offer the artifacts required to actualize user agency and instigate mass change.

Paratexts are however, closely entwined with community groups and guilds. Whether these groupings are thought of as innovation communities, social hubs, or task-oriented raid teams, they remain an important venue for the creation and diffusion of popular paratexts. Community groups thus allow paratexts to flourish by providing a sphere for the discussion and debate of various user-made products. Communities such as guilds often share information on effective add-ons, builds, or helpful wiki's to increase the effectiveness of the group. Social forums can also be used to popularize user videos, comics, or other pieces of user-created game culture.

More importantly however, community involvement contributes to the standardization of play. Just as S remarked on how to play the “right” way, communities generate the public consciousness and feedback necessary to affirm normalized patterns of play. Communities can reinforce the use of certain paratexts while discouraging wasteful or inefficient practices, working to create a strong, unofficial gaming culture. In this regard, paratexts that attain a strong communal presence and positive reputation can diffuse through the gaming population at a rapid pace, passing through virtual word-of-mouth and user recommendation. While paratexts may help to extend the longevity and user-fulfillment of WoW, online community groups appear necessary for their proliferation.

5.4 Community Involvement Can Have a Positive Impact on User Innovation

In looking to the entirety of the data, it seems that a case can be made for the positive relationship between community involvement and user innovation. Membership in online communities, be they social or task-oriented, assert particular pressures on members which appear conducive to the adoption or development of new techniques, tools, and knowledge structures. While the nature of the impetus varies on the type of community the user is involved in, community participation itself seems to provide a marked incentive for the use of paratexts and forums. This becomes particularly evident when one compares the experiences of active community participants such as L or M with solo players such as K or H. Perhaps the most common form of community influence comes through guild associations and competition. Guilds, particularly high end raiding guilds, create optimal conditions for the use and distribution of paratexts, particularly ones that lend the user a

competitive edge. In looking to the comments of B, D, and M, we see that raiding guilds are exclusive and highly competitive, both internally and externally. That is to say that members are under constant surveillance from their peers and guild leaders to perform at high levels lest they face demotion or other forms of social repercussion. Moreover the guilds themselves jostle and compete for rank within their servers. This creates a constant incentive to improve performance, whether by adopting existing strategies and tools or, more rarely, by creating novel ones to suit their purposes. In both cases we see the emergence of Von Hippel's model of user innovation as community members adapt their techniques as well as their tools to better accomplish in game tasks (Hippel, 2005). High-end raiding guilds thus serve as an ideal testing ground for developing paratexts, testing their efficacy, and diffusing them throughout the larger WoW population. In the past we have seen this done with add-ons such as CT Raid and Deadly Boss Mod (L, Interview), as well as with reputable information databases such as Elitist Jerks (R, Interview). In this regard paratext usage tends to become a necessary element of guild membership owing to the incredibly high demand for performance. As noted by B and L, raid guilds represent the pinnacle of skill and capability. In addition to being difficult to access, maintaining the required level of performance over long periods of time remains a challenging task. Living on the bleeding edge of the game so to speak thus places demands on users to adapt and innovate beyond what is required of non-raiding or solo players. As stated by B, many of the tools and paratexts circulated through raid guilds allowed him to perform feats that would not be possible otherwise, extending the limits of his reflexes and perception. As such raiding guilds

and the competition they breed fuel the desire for increased innovation, pushing the envelope of user performance and providing an incentive for users to become more invested in the game itself.

Though perhaps not as powerful an impulse as high-end raid guilds, social communities and forums provide a similarly fertile environment for the growth of user innovation. Unlike raid guilds, the driving force behind innovation in social communities is not competition but rather the desire for collective benefit and improved gaming experience as a whole. In terms of general knowledge structures, forums and user created websites tend to encourage paratext usage and creation. As mentioned by D, several game features and services can trace their origins to the forums and the unique channels of communication they create between users as well as developers. D cites Transmogriphication, a feature that allows users to fully customize their avatar's in game appearance, as one such development to emerge from the constant banter of the forums (D, Interview). However, as forums are routinely used to connect users with similar queries, petition developers for specific changes, and air grievances regarding current game issues, they comprise a unique type of social community where membership is largely inclusive, pseudonymous, and unstructured. There are generally no vetting processes involved in joining a forum group, consequently forum populations are typically fluid and chaotic. Indeed this lack of stability does have a marked effect on the efficacy of forums, as noted by several of the participants. While participants such as T, L, and D commented on the lack of accountability and tumultuous nature of forum exchanges, they also conceded that forum use did yield productive advice and dialogue from time to time.

This was particularly evident when members of the Blizzard Development Team or “blue posters” (M, Interview) responded to user inquiries. In contrast to the stable, interconnected communities of raiding guilds, forum groups present a highly anarchical collection of loosely bonded users yet it is this nodal structure of free-floating individuals which has also aided in the popularization of user driven initiatives as well as the rapid diffusion of paratexts. In this regard the forums are akin to a virtual mob, capable of mass action and information circulation but also prone to descending into mass ataxia.

In looking to the formation of innovation communities as described by Von Hippel, difficulty arises in identifying concrete boundaries by which users are considered included or excluded. Given the highly social and interconnected nature of WoW, and to a large extent MMOs in general, being part of such a community does not necessarily require the same degree of investment as an offline group. As noted earlier, though MMO innovation groups share many characteristics typical of existing online innovation communities such as those based around open source software (Hippel, 2005), their conditions of membership seem far more vague and indeterminate. Does one include solely the innovators and user-creators themselves, or is membership in the community extended to those who simply use the products and pass them on through word-of-mouth? What about the countless number of users who provide feedback and advice through community forum threads and private messages? It is thus my belief that all of these components are integral parts of the MMO innovation community, and that given the highly social nature of MMOs, these groups do not have to be particularly close-knit to take

advantage of the immense resources and wealth of experience provided by its members. The innovation communities of WoW may be comprised of overlapping groups of raid guilds as well as social groups and forum dwellers which all play a role in extending the negotiative power and capabilities of the user (Glas, 2010). To partake in one of these communities is, by extension, to access the infinitely diverse realm of paratexts, add-ons, machinima, and narrative culture that are the products of MMO user innovation.

While it may seem over zealous to brand all community involvement as contributing to the growth of user agency and product creation, there is a caveat in that certain community members will undoubtedly be more productive than others. In taking a holistic approach to defining MMO innovation communities, it is not my intention to allot all members an equal claim as user-innovators, but rather to recognize the monumental complexity and interdependency of in-game communities and the role that all members play, however modest, in refining and propagating the products of the innovators themselves. If this still seems too broad and all-encompassing a term, recall that even within the sample of 10 participants, there were 2 who actively avoided communities, paratexts, and add-ons. Participants K and H represent a number of the WoW population who take measures to exclude themselves from the innovation community at large. Be it through disinterest or other personal motivations, many users choose not to partake in online communities and thus form an out-group of sorts. While by no means the majority, such users demonstrate that community involvement is not a mandatory part of the game, though it does constitute a large portion of the gaming

experience, nor are all users considered innovators simply by virtue of existing in the virtual world. Perhaps another critique of this finding may be that it seems self-evident that community involvement would lead to increased user agency given the nature of social collaboration and relatively open structure of the game. I respond by stating that while such a concept may appear simple on the surface, this study has sought to unpack the mechanisms and social dynamics that empower users and influence their decisions on the level of the individual. By peering, however briefly, into the inner workings of the raid guild, the social community, and the forum group, we are afforded a fuller understanding of how user agency and innovation flourishes. Thus, the goal of this study is not to treat user innovation and community involvement as a sort of technological black box which results in the production of paratexts and user-made goods, but rather to observe and document the pressures, incentives, and minutia of everyday virtual life which influence the creation of new products and the expansion of the role of the user in MMO gaming. To this extent I have tried to dissect the notion of community involvement itself, noting the varying levels of investment among participants, if and how they believed they were contributing to the game, what their expectations were of their communities, and even any reasons why they would avoid communal interaction or discard their social groups. I will conclude by reaffirming that my findings suggest community association and involvement does indeed have a positive affect on user agency through the increase of user innovation both directly, as in the case of the innovators themselves who author paratexts, as well as tangentially through the community members at large who transmit the paratexts. As such community

involvement remains a complex and multilayered process which can pave the way for fascinating innovations but also provide revealing insights about the virtual worlds we create and our role as digital denizens.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the outset of this study, the primary question I sought to answer was how users innovate and influence the MMO game *World of Warcraft*, a product which they seemingly possess little direct control over. Since that time I have examined several user communities, interviewed multiple players with experience in various gaming groups, and looked in detail at the evolution of the game throughout its eight-year operation. The interviews spanned a wide range of issues, from the use and creation of paratexts, to the challenges of competitive guild membership, and even the rewards of being involved in a rich and fulfilling online social community. Based on the evidence provided by these interviews, I argue that users do indeed play an active role in shaping the development of the game as well as their own experiences in the virtual world. Through the utilization of paratexts and the formation of unique online communities, users have introduced novel gameplay elements and innovative techniques that have allowed them to profoundly impact the game and enhance their own agency as users.

6.1 The Power of Paratexts

As revealed in the majority of the interviews, the most prominent apparatus of user-generated innovation was the utilization of paratexts. Many of the users had watched some form of instructional video to help overcome in-game challenges or improve their playing styles. Most had adopted various forms of UI modification or other add-on services to customize their interface functions. And nearly all had used a forum thread or user-generated wiki at some point to glean information on game

items or quests. Cumulatively these paratexts led to certain users developing and sharing unique strategies which not only optimized their own playing experience but explored the game in ways which were not congruent with the developers initial expectations. Ownership of the game thus occurred through the adaptation and development of techniques that gave users the ability to manage their own gaming experience without altering the fundamental dynamics of WoW itself.

- *Theorycraft* was employed utilizing meticulously crafted user-generated paratexts to maximize abilities through the manipulation of statistics, largely removing any elements of variation in character building and creating a uniform blueprint for how to play certain classes.
- *Concrete raid and gameplay strategies* became essential resources, streamlining endgame content and allowing users to circumvent the normally long periods of trial and error and meandering game paths initially planned by the developer.
- *Add-ons* were developed to suit user needs, modify the user interface, and perform services not provided by the developer such as tracking party performance or enhancing PvP and guild play.
- *Unofficial game culture* was created and disseminated throughout the WoW community as user-made videos, guild websites, forums, and even full length movies (machinima). Through various paratexts users were able to construct social groups across multiple servers, share anecdotes about their online exploits, and even create extensive rivalries between top ranking guilds.

In this regard the ownership demonstrated by users was the appropriation of game culture and experiences to weave original narratives and create deeply meaningful social bonds. Paratexts were used to distinguish correct and incorrect methods of play, they dictated how users should progress through the game and even how to structure their relationships and communities as seen through the mandatory use of add-ons in high end guilds.

6.2 Changing the Face of the Game

While the majority of paratexts reside outside the technical confines of the game as user-made resources and websites, it was telling to note how many of the participants could recall add-on programs being adopted into the official UI. Undoubtedly the original user interface of the game, circa 2004, presented marked differences from its current incarnation including limited tool tips, combat options, navigation options, aesthetic differences and ornamental changes. Participants noted that various functions such as detailed PvP combat information (S, Interview), raid instructions (D, Interview, 20120), and map location graphics (T, Interview) had now been embedded in the game UI, and that these functions had their roots in various user-created add-on programs. Moreover ideas for larger concepts such as cross-server communications and greater customizability of avatar appearance could be traced to dialogue between developers and users on the official game forums (D, Interview). Overall the inclusion of these user-generated products represents the most direct and observable instances of embodied innovation. While the abundance of technique based paratexts such as wikis largely dwarf the number of add-ons taken up by the developer, the introduction of user-created products into

the official game design demonstrates that developers are aware of the labor and productive capability of the users. The dynamic of official adoption appears to adhere to Von Hippel's Lead User Theory, wherein the WoW user base can be stratified into innovator groups who create and distribute add-ons, test groups who popularize them (advanced users such as D and B), and finally the remainder of the gaming population who receive the add-on only after Blizzard has incorporated it into the official structure of the game (casual users such as H and K) (Hippel, 2005). In this regard, WoW produces groups which function similarly to traditional innovation communities, although with somewhat diminished direct control and implementation of the final product.

6.3 Who's in Control?

The stratification and diversity among the user base was particularly apparent when comparing user groups of varying investment and community involvement. The initial assumption that high end users would utilize paratexts and add-ons to a greater extent than casual ones was largely supported through the interviews. Indeed we saw that several factors including membership in raiding guilds and competitive environments played a significant role in driving users to engage with and even contribute to the existing body of paratexts. Moreover casual users with less obligation to social or competitive in-game communities felt little need to exploit the tremendous amount of user-generated resources available, using wikis or guides only when they were stuck at an impasse in the game. Additionally they showed fewer tendencies to alter their user interface with user created add-ons or other non-official software. While it may seem scattered at first glance, a

profile begins to emerge of which user demographics utilize specific forms of paratexts. The interviews suggest that the most detailed paratexts are largely the domain of endgame raiders and serious PvP players. These are the meticulously crafted theory articles and raid videos that most advanced users claimed were necessary for play at the highest levels of the game. Yet, many of these same advanced users were not pleased that certain add-on and paratext features had been incorporated into the official UI, diminishing the general difficulty of once monumental tasks requiring large-scale coordination and specialized knowledge. For some, these sentiments were grounded in a perceived decline in the challenge in the game, while others were simply spiteful of the fact that tasks which once took hours or even days could be accomplished now in a fraction of the time. What emerged was a general consensus that Blizzard, the developer, was consistently lowering the challenge of the game by introducing tools which sped up the pace of gameplay and provided information which at one point could only be gleaned from unofficial paratexts. While advanced users relished the use of paratexts and complex add-ons they seemed opposed to this gradual “watering down” (B, Interview) of game content. Casual gamers however felt that this dynamic was a positive one, stating that the average user lacks the time required to break into the upper echelon of the gaming community. Thus by introducing these user innovations Blizzard was finally allowing the average user to access endgame content which had for so long been monopolized by hardcore and advanced raiders. The relationship between these 2 groups is undoubtedly complex, while this study performed some

preliminary inquiry into the effects of paratext usage and communal involvement, there is much left to explore in this regard.

6.4 Future Work

Possibilities for future studies into user driven innovation in MMOs and the use of paratexts could follow a similar methodology of qualitative interviews however changes to the sample size and location could yield more generalizable data. As this study was largely concerned with local gamers, it may be of interest to examine the perspective of users outside of Canada. Interviewing a larger pool of international players would provide insight into how users outside of Canada attempt to innovate WoW and whether paratexts play as large a role in countries with remarkably high MMO subscribership such as South Korea. Moreover it would be useful for profiling the distribution of innovation globally to determine whether add-ons and paratexts are adopted uniformly or are heterogeneously appropriated by geographically separated users. Additionally looking at MMOs besides WoW would be beneficial in uncovering whether user innovation is a phenomenon particular to *World of Warcraft* or common across multiple games. Given the intensely co-operative nature of WoW and its incredible popularity it may be that the game itself provides the ideal breeding ground for user innovation and paratexts however examination of other contemporary MMOs as well as long established ones such as *Everquest* could shed additional light on the role of user innovation in the MMO genre at large.

The correlation between community involvement and paratext use begs further investigation. The interviews revealed a strong relationship between

investment in online communities and a willingness to develop and employ novel techniques and innovative products. Future studies could explore additional aspects of this relationship to determine how factors aside from competition influence user's decisions to engage with the game in unofficial capacities. As extended paratext use also appears to be a hallmark of advanced users, additional research could examine whether community involvement facilitates the progression from casual to advanced levels of play.

As paratexts themselves are not limited to the field of MMOs, the questions broached in this study are applicable to other technologies as well. User-created wikis, tutorial videos, and blogs exist covering a vast range of products and services. Like *World of Warcraft*, many of these platforms are not directly altered by users, but rather can be employed in novel and unexpected ways. Bodies of paratexts may focus on practical application and instruction such as those associated with graphic design or programming software, whereas others are involved in the creation of external narratives and culture, as is largely the case in blogs and wikis concerning film and television. These paratexts imply the existence of numerous online communities which play an active role in the consumption and development of a host of a products and technologies. Extrapolating on the basic framework and results of this study, it is possible to explore the role of user-driven innovation in many of these contemporary fields.

6.5 User Innovation in MMO Games

In exploring the relationship between communities, developers, and online spaces, this study has uncovered some of the key mechanisms through which users

innovate and influence the game *World of Warcraft*. Community involvement was shown to foster a competitive environment and created the social rewards which pushed users to adopt new techniques and strategies. They also served as reservoirs of knowledge and advice propagating the spread of expertise. Paratexts in turn provided the specialized knowledge and tools required to advance through the game and supplied users with an unofficial culture and set of best practices for play. In combination these two aspects played a pivotal role in changing how users interacted with the game, and indeed how the game itself continued to develop.

The significance of these findings in relation to the study of MMO games and innovation studies at large is a re-evaluation of the role paratexts play for the average user. The interviews have demonstrated that much of the WoW experience resides outside the confines of the game itself. The sheer volume and prodigious use of paratexts suggests that they are highly influential in determining how users perceive, interact with, and ultimately change the game of WoW. Moreover it was suggested by certain participants that much of the appeal of WoW lies in the construction and dissemination of the paratexts themselves. Despite their status as an unofficial resource, paratexts have become inextricably tied to users' gaming experiences, dictating codes of conduct and the overall "right way" to play the game (S, Interview). In examining paratexts and the communities which create them, new avenues are being opened for the study of MMOs as collaborative products of user input and professional development. Paratexts have had an undeniable effect on MMO development, from the inclusion of add-ons to the alteration of gameplay elements and basic mechanics. As such MMO games like WoW cannot be situated as

sole products of the developing company, but must acknowledge the innovative contributions of its player base as well.

This study has explored how users innovate and claim ownership of the MMO game *World of Warcraft* through paratext use and involvement in online communities. While there is still much to be learned regarding patterns of user agency in this new virtual frontier, the diverse social matrices and unique innovative opportunities afforded through MMOs present a rich and emergent field of inquest. Located at an ideal crossroads of digital technology and online culture, MMOs and similar persistent virtual communities can be expected to grow in number and subscribership. As such continued study of the role played by users in their development and function remains a poignant area of research.

Interview Guide

1. Do you have online friends that you've met through the game?
2. Are they relegated to the game or do you have contact with them offline?
3. Would you say they are different from your "real life" friends? Why or why not?
4. What activities do you engage in most in the game? (Dungeons, Solo Levelling, Crafting, Raiding, PvP)
5. Are you in a guild? And if so, how would you describe your relationship with fellow guild members?
6. (If participant is in a guild) For you, what is the main benefit of being in a guild? Why do you stay in it?
7. What are the main activities your guild engages in? Would you describe it as a competitive guild or a social one?
8. How active or demanding would you consider your in-game social community to be? Would it be comparable to a Facebook or other social networking community
9. Do you ever feel over-burdened by your in-game friendships or commitments?
10. Which of the game's social functions would you say you use the most? (chat channels, group finder, etc.)

11. Do you feel satisfied with the social functions available in the game? What would you change?
12. Do you use apps such as RealID or Auction House which indicate your real identity or otherwise tie you personally to the game?
13. Do you use any add-ons? Have you ever contributed to or made any?
14. Do you think add-ons enhance your gaming experience? Are they necessary in any respects?
15. Have you ever posted comments or read through the WoW forums on the Blizzard site? On any site? If so why?
16. Have you used item databases or wiki's like WowHead or Thottbot?
17. Do you feel that you have any sort of venue for voicing complaints or implementing change regarding the game?
18. Do you think the average player has any say in how the game develops?
19. Do you think patch changes or game updates are balanced and respond to the needs of game players?
20. Do you play any other online games?

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