

FOLKLORE OF THE VIRTUAL ELVES:
SOCIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND
PERFORMANCE IN A MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER
ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME (MMORPG)

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Abstract

As virtual worlds gain popularity, they are quickly becoming places of online culture. Within these cultural contexts, players are re-inventing themselves through postmodern constructions of identity. This M.A. thesis explores the role of folklore in the virtual identity construction and performance within the online community of the massively multi-player online role-playing game *Warhammer Online*. As a product of popular culture, *Warhammer Online* acts as both a construction of commercialism and as a site of vernacular culture. Player communities participate in a power relationship with the development company as they negotiate the cultural commodification of play experience and vernacular appropriation. Flows of knowledge and folklore within these relationships pattern players' experience of *Warhammer Online* and contribute to the broader migration of player groups between virtual worlds themselves. Employing ethnographic techniques, this thesis traces the experience of players through phenomenological embodiment and self-perception in avatar creation to social performance in negotiating existential authenticity and community conflict.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Contemporary folkloristics has long since realized that folklore is not an artefact of a rural peasant past nor is it only found lurking amongst the poor quarters in a rundown urban setting. Folklore exists wherever people are, and people are increasingly online. People are switching on and logging in. They log into social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. They sign into instant chat programs like Windows Live Messenger and video-chat software like Skype. They post messages on their favourite forums and create videos to share on YouTube. They animate and become "avatars" in hundreds of virtual worlds across cyberspace. With cellular phones capable of, and frequently used to, surf the internet, video game consoles globally linked to each other and software applications inside everything from cameras to cars, our society is continuing to embrace technology in no small terms; the popularization and wide-spread distribution of computer technology in North American society has led to an astonishing level of integration with the virtual, be it online banking or online gaming that was only dimly perceivable barely two decades ago. As computers and computer skills become necessary in an increasing number of sectors of life, we are reorienting ourselves at both a cultural and individual level to adapt and appropriate these new media.

At the forefront of this cultural-technological shift are virtual worlds – graphical and temporally synchronous computer-mediated spaces existing ephemerally in cyberspace that are becoming part of the everyday lives of millions of people worldwide. These users or players, depending on whether the world was designed purely for socialization or as a game, create graphical digital visions of themselves inside these worlds to interact with each other. Potentially global in scope, virtual world populations are made of people coming from any number of

different socio-cultural, ethnic, economic or political backgrounds and contexts; as platforms of interactive new media, virtual worlds offer space that becomes place with the development of community and culture specific to that world – constructed in part by the actual world views and experiences of its population but also the synthesis of those traditions with new technology to create unique experiential meanings and transmit knowledge and folklore of those meanings. The idea that folklore can be created and transmitted amongst folk groups using recent innovative technology is not new for folklorists: as early as 1975, Dundes and Pagter demonstrated that the non-orally transmitted folklore of the office photocopier was as valid and *bona fide* as more traditional orality (Dundes and Pagter 1975; Dundes and Pagter 1987; Dundes and Pagter 1991). In 1990 Bausinger argued that technology and folk culture were not mutually exclusive concepts and that technology plays a natural role in contemporary folk culture (Bausinger 1990). Whether it is cultural knowledge of virtual geography or cheats and tactics in a game world, virtual worlds are spaces rich in sociality, folklore and culture with many different modes and means of communication ranging from character animations to voice chat.

In order to understand the social processes occurring in virtual worlds, it is necessary to see the world through the eyes of the player. Kerr refers to this as “virtual perspective,” delineating the difference between the etic view of a person sitting at a computer in a room and how the insider perceives self within the virtual world (Kerr 2008, 5). You see someone on a computer. The person is sitting with his or her back facing you. You say something to confirm they are there. No response or a grunt of acknowledgement: they are not there, not really. The person you are looking over the shoulder of is staring intently at a screen...not a television screen, not a cell phone screen, but a computer screen. You look at their eyes. They are not

blinking. Instead, their pupils dart quickly back and forth as they track the movement of a target on the screen. This person is in another world. He or she is inside the screen, inside the game. In some dramatic performance of a kind of techno-shamanism, this person has used the screen as a magic device, as a portal to another world, and transformed themselves into a character, or "avatar": a three-dimensional aesthetic collection of pixels constructed to represent them that they are now focusing all of their attention on *animating*. You see this animation dashing and jumping on the screen in front of you, but as an observer you are not transformed. You are not drawn into this other world. You remain in the actual world and still see someone sitting at a computer. The scene inside that world on the other side of the screen is completely different. The person, your friend, the avatar, is completing a dangerous quest in a fantastical world ruled by sword and magic. He or she is not sitting at the computer. They are not fully aware of the buttons they are pressing on the keyboard in front of them that they so desperately tap every once and awhile. The keyboard and mouse are there, empirically speaking, in actuality but they do not exist in the virtual world. The mouse is a sword that a left-click sends in a broad, swinging attack.

Any given virtual world is composed of people logging in and adopting this virtual perspective, shifting their actual world identity and adding new ones. To date, there are hundreds of such virtual worlds spread across every imagined corner of cyberspace and countless people inhabiting them. These worlds exist at an interesting intersection between leisure, commercialism, and popular culture. As cultural products developed for monetary profit capitalizing on the leisure activity of participants, they also function as platforms of vernacular culture and folklore. Beyond being games or events of psychological escapism, people choose to

inhabit these worlds for their own individual reasons and create their own value. The interactions and shared experiences of these inhabitants make virtual worlds communities and sites of culture. This thesis is focused on one kind of virtual world, the MMORPG, and, specifically, on the MMORPG *Warhammer Online* created by Mythic Entertainment. MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) are three-dimensional graphical and synchronous environments in which players interact with thousands of others (providing the "massively multiplayer" designation) through the creation of "avatars," three-dimensional characters and advance through the game system. Though no standardized typology exists, despite some recent attempts (Spence 2008), MMORPGs are often loosely considered a sub-genre of MMOs or MMOGs (massively multiplayer online game), which can potentially encompass any virtual world but tend to refer to game worlds. Other generic abbreviations roughly classified under MMO/MMOG include "MMOFPS" (massively multiplayer online first-person shooter), which are similar virtual game worlds but use avatars differently with no role-playing element). Art design and story narrative for *Warhammer Online* were drawn from the lore of the *Warhammer* franchise, which will be discussed later on, and players complete quests to gain virtual currency and "level," or advance, their avatar. MMORPGs host thriving and complex virtual cultures: in interpreting the particular culture of *Warhammer Online*, I will give a history of the development of the MMORPG and attempt to descriptively paint the ethnographic context of the world.



Figure 1.1 - Orcs and goblins standing outside a fortress (screenshot by author)

1.1 Role-playing versus Playing Roles

The lineage of the MMORPG is not a tidy straight line, but rather a curious combination of different ideas and media. They share similarities with both computer game technology and actual world role-playing games. Here I will address the crucial concept of role-playing and how it relates to MMORPGs. When I began researching MMORPGs, I thought that I understood exactly that question. The text-based, computer-mediated MUD ("multi-user dungeon" or "multi-user domain") is the accepted predecessor of the MMORPG (Bartle 1996; Castronova 2005). I understood the difference between them, which is essentially medium: one entirely text-based and the other a three-dimensional graphical world (though both employing internet and

computer technology). MUDs are essentially glorified chat rooms; played online, players create a character and type out his or her actions to the group. MUDs are descended from "pen and paper" role-playing games (RPGs), actually played with dice and pencils, from which they get their game structure and rules. The first commercial role-playing game was *Dungeons & Dragons*, released in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules, Inc. I qualify the preceding sentence with "commercial" because I suspect that the social actions that constitute "role-playing" have a far older history than the rule set of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

As I will detail in greater depth later on, *Dungeons & Dragons*-style role-playing consists of a group of people together with dice and one person in charge of narrating the imagined story and resolving disputes. Players create imagined characters, recasting themselves as other creatures like elves or dwarves in different fantastic settings, and perform their new identity through speech and imagined action. Some groups add material components, such as the use of actual swords and costumes in LARPing (live-action role-playing). "Role-playing" is essentially an imaginary social game with rules, but with the focus of temporarily masking or transforming the players' identities. Masking and festival have historically been traditional subjects of study for folklorists (Abrahams 1998; Bauman 1992; Bendix 1998; Caillois 1961; Noyes 1998; Yoder 1974) and role-playing is simply another kind of expressive culture. Noyes and Bendix link traditional European costuming with Hebdige's (1979) subcultures as expression and manipulation of identity (Noyes and Bendix 1998). In the more visually-oriented MMORPGs, the imagined "characters" of role-playing are created in a slightly more tangible fashion, with first the body of the avatar and then its accompanying gear being layers of socially-viewable costume. While avatar and gear as costume confines (since both are ultimately created by the

developers), it also liberates as players have agency in how they construct their appearance and costume, when they “wear” it and where, balancing the function of costume as a weapon in *Warhammer Online* and aesthetics. From online guilds holding regular poetry readings to LARPers headed up to a cabin for a weekend of role-playing adventure, imagined role-playing identities constructed and performed through costume involve festival.

Ultimately, the leading view accepted by most virtual worlds scholars is that the modern MMORPG is a direct descendent of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Bartle 1996; Boellstorff 2008; Learning 2009). Evidence for this can literally be seen in the coding of the game: the rules used in the first generation of MMOs were directly from the “D20 system” (referring to 20-sided dice) designed by Tactical Studies Rules, Inc. Fair enough, I thought, as I walked into an interview with “R,” one of my earliest informants. About fifteen minutes into the interview, I asked “R” if he had played *Dungeons & Dragons* before he played *Warhammer Online*. He looked at me quizzically and said, “Never.” Neither had he ever engaged in any other role-playing of that type. No, no MUDs. I continued to explore the game through participant observation. Through one of my early avatars, the unfortunate wizard “Theodan¹,” I met people, killed monsters with fireballs and looted treasure. During this time I never encountered anyone role-playing. Yet was this not officially a role-playing game? The term “role-playing” is, after all, literally in the abbreviation “MMORPG”. The role-playing community in *Warhammer Online* does indeed exist, as I later discovered, but was fenced into a server specifically created for role-players. The server, “Phoenix Throne,” was set apart from the rest of the game’s servers in that it had special rules that limit kinds of player names (i.e.: no “Ipwnzurmom19991”) and players were expected,

¹Theodan had multiple scars on his face and across one blind eye. He was “unfortunate” in that I had more than one person run up to me and tell me, in private chat, that I was ugly (one player actually asked if I had been going for an “emo cutler” look). This was not quite the social reaction I had been hoping for.

but not required, to speak “in character.” When I first created my Sorceress character, “Moriquendlyn,” on Phoenix Throne, I found RPer (role-players) and, because we were playing the evil faction “Destruction” and many players were embodying orcs and goblins and speaking in their “dialect,” I couldn’t understand anything they said.² Not everyone on Phoenix Throne role-played, however, and “RPing” was considered separate from “normal” or “regular” gameplay and seen as playing beyond the game requirements. The majority of my fieldwork was spent playing alongside the role-players on Phoenix Throne. As I sequestered myself with the role-players, I wondered where I was. How was this an online role-playing game if many players had never played *Dungeons & Dragons* or MUDs and were interacting the same as they would in a multiplayer first-person shooter, instead of a group of pen & paper players on an imagined adventure?

In his master’s thesis on a similar MMO, *Dark Age of Camelot* (incidentally, also developed by Mythic Entertainment), Learning denotes generic distinctions between MMORPGs and MMOGs. He suggests that the former is in fact a misnomer since the majority of players do not actually role-play and that such groups who do are too small to represent the population at large (Learning 2009, 3). By the time I left regular hours of play on Phoenix Throne, what had once been a strong role-playing community had gradually disintegrated or migrated. Based on interviews with informants and participant observation on three servers, one being a dedicated role-playing server, I eventually came to share Learning’s conclusion that the majority of the population do not role-play in what is allegedly a role-playing game that is supposed to share a gameplay structure with its common ancestor, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Learning 2009, 3). Why is

² “Speech” in *Warhammer Online* is by default text-chat, so what you type is what your character “says.”

role-playing the accepted lineage of the modern MMO? On what basis does one trace this lineage? A history of the technology and three-dimensional graphical worlds would suggest a parentage of older single-player RPG computer games with limited support for a multiplayer function. Perhaps ancestry can be traced through a history of social interaction and gameplay? How are players playing these games? A MUD without role-playing is a chat room. Single-player RPGs, such as *Diablo*, are graphical worlds where gameplay is dominated by a quest narrative and players create an avatar to accomplish tasks. Classified as a "platformer" *Mario Bros.* also had "avatars," but merely as a representation of where the player was in relation to the map on the screen. In the loosely-defined computer/video game industry generic classification system, computer-based RPGs seem to be games with a quest narrative and character depth, where the player's avatar not only responds to their commands but has a multitude of skills and abilities that can be advanced throughout the game as the avatar "grows." These games do not require role-playing. They are termed "role-playing" because the structure of the game, how players customize and advance their avatars set against a powerful narrative, is borrowed from pen and paper role-playing games. The role-playing is automated and animated, which invites the question of whether players are actually role-playing.

What is role-playing? Pen and paper role-playing games did not fade away with the advent of computers. Most bookstores will carry the large number of tomes in which the rules are set out. These games involve rulebooks, multi-sided dice and imagination with the occasional map thrown in. While I was conducting fieldwork in the virtual world of *Warhammer Online*, I was also offered the opportunity in the actual world to explore an entirely different kind of virtual space. My "pen-and-paper" role-playing group consists of five players and one DM

(dungeon master) who designs the world, dictates the narrative, and referees the game. After buying a set of oddly-shaped polyhedral green dice on eBay, I found myself sitting in the living room of a relative stranger, surrounded by people I knew only through this game. The DM starts off a story and often has a broad plan of where the narrative is headed, but it is entirely up to the players what they decide to do and where they decide to go. The narrative is created, shaped and played through collective effort. Unlike my fieldwork, there was no screen to act as a magic portal. I was armed only with my dice and a character sheet. "Pen-and-paper" refers to the character sheets and other notes you write down concerning your character. He or she is created through a lengthy but precise process of dice-rolling and point distribution to develop a set of skills and abilities. Players then perform their characters, sometimes speaking "in character" or creating elaborate backgrounds and personalities. The DM speaks and narrates the game. Everyone in the room simultaneously imagines that scene in their minds. The DM creates obstacles like enemy trolls, wolves or raiders to test your group. Each player responds to the scenario however he or she chooses, envisioning the action in their head. The dice are used to decide outcomes, such as whether your sword hits an enemy or if you fall while climbing a tree. These games rely directly on assuming the role of your character and reacting, through speech and dice rolls, to your group and environment. The current DM of my group has been playing these games for decades, and often eschews the stricter rulebooks, maps and miniatures in favour of a purely imagined cinematic narrative.

While not extensively studied by folklorists, pen-and-paper role-playing games are not unknown (Fine 1983) and game studies in general often overlaps with folkloristics (Callois 1961; Goldstein 1989; McDowell 1999; Oring 1997; Sutton-Smith 1959; Sutton-Smith 1997; Turner

1969). Caillouis notes the persistence of games through time (1961, 81), a view commonly held by early folklorists that traced games to folk practices and traditions of great antiquity. More recently, McDowell modified this view by suggesting that games are continuously being re-invented, but using transmitted "traditional competence" in the form of underlying formulaic structures (1999, 61). Sutton-Smith uses the term "role-clothings" to refer to the positions or roles played in the children's game Red Rover (1959, 23), which are not unlike playing a group role in *Dungeons & Dragons* or a "position" in Learning's conception of MMORPG players (2009, 3). Role-playing games are complex in depth and scope as they can be variously classified under three of Sutton-Smith's "rhetorics of play," "progress"; "identity"; and "imaginary" (1997, 9), although the author himself identifies *Dungeons & Dragons* in passing as "mind/subjective play" type of game and situates it at the "private" end of a private/public spectrum of play (1997, 4). This statement is true of single-player computer games of the RPG genre, in which players only interact with scripted computer-controlled characters, but certainly not *Dungeons & Dragons*; role-playing games are subjective inasmuch as the play is visualized in each player's head, but it is a collective and inherently social shared fantasy that is grounded in the actual world (Fine 1983, 72). The shared imaginary worlds created through social role-play are constructed partially through traditional competency (McDowell 1999) and through game mechanics that blur boundaries between theatre and board game. In quoting Huizinga (1955), Sutton-Smith notes that play "creates a poetic world alongside the original world" (1997, 202). This is indicative of role-playing social imaginary worlds that, through caricature, "tell us about what is real" (Fine 1983, 7).

An RPG is a synthesis of game structure with simultaneous imagining. For any *Dungeons & Dragons* group, the latter element is most important. This is not to say that there are not fans devoted to the mountains of rulebooks and rulebook-supplements that these types of games generate, but at its core such a game system is a work of creative imagination with game structure imposed as a framework. MMORPGs reverse this reciprocal relationship by placing emphasis on a system of game rules and limiting the imagination to the developer's creativity that appears onscreen. Where even text-based MUDs were simply a recasting of pen-and-paper RPGs in a new media, MMORPGs draw on only some of the core elements to create a genre of computer games that owes its heritage to the actual world but is realized differently. This transition to a graphical three-dimensional online media is where Learning's statement of playing positions rather than roles comes from. Most telling is the MMORPG *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, which is not simply an automation of the pen-and-paper-version. What traditional elements are included in these virtual worlds?

Significantly, character development and party roles are what cross the actual-virtual divide but how you interact with these elements changes. Creating a character in *Warhammer Online* involves choosing from a limited number of available physical appearances (to be somewhat customized later on in terms of equipment) that all other players will see, rather than describing the look of your avatar to your compatriots. Party roles represent a significant element in the transmission of folklore in *Warhammer Online*, and so will be addressed in detail later on. For now, suffice it to say that while it was clear in pen-and-paper RPGs that each different character with a different skill set was useful for different tasks, the tactical nature of *Warhammer Online* has led that system to become institutionalized and developed specific ways

of playing (virtual lifeways?) your avatar to maximize efficiency within a group of players. For example, if you are a "caster" (such as a Bright Wizard or Sorcerer) you are socially expected to have both certain character skills and to know when to use them in combat.

1.2 The History of *Warhammer*

Thus far, this introduction has explored the relations between different kinds of role-playing game systems and MMORPGs in an attempt to elucidate a history of development that led to the creation of MMORPGs. *Warhammer Online* has its own specific history of development that differs from other MMORPGs. Like some other similar worlds, such as *World of Warcraft*, *Warhammer Online* uses a role-playing game system, but unlike other MMORPG worlds is also descended from a tabletop wargame. The *Warhammer* franchise was initially launched with a series of games using dice and rulers and small self-painted military units. In traditional *Warhammer*, players would buy and construct boxed sets of miniature soldiers and deploy them on a constructed battlefield (usually a kitchen table with ingeniously devised terrain objects like trees, rocks and gravel). With rulebooks determining the attributes of each miniature, dice to decide chance, and rulers to measure range, players could field armies against each other in tactical combat. This differed from role-playing games in terms of scope, lack of individual character development (to role-play) and reliance on physical position rather than imagination. *Warhammer* computer games, such as *Dawn of War*, tend to be designed as automated versions of the tabletop game; to that end, they are often classified under the "strategy" computer game genre. *Warhammer Online* primarily borrowed setting and narrative from its tabletop predecessor.

Warhammer: Fantasy Battle was first released in 1983 by Games Workshop and was set in a "high fantasy" world, heavily influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien, whose denizens included races of humans, elves, goblins and undead creatures. This game allowed for player creativity not only in terms of battlefield tactics but in the construction of armies and terrain. While players buy official Games Workshop retail packages of units, the soldiers inside come in pieces that allow the player artistic creativity in how they glue them together and paint designs. Rather than the purely-imagined characters of role-playing games, *Warhammer Online* seems to have focused on emulating character customization of the tabletop war game. Games Workshop released its own line of paints specially for its miniatures, and these colours (with names such as "Blood Red" and "Goblin Green") are reflected, complete with names, in the MMORPG where the player has the ability to dye pieces of equipment different colours. This lineage of character customization (and therefore an element of player identity construction) differing from MUDs and RPGs, is also manifested in the types of equipment available. The tabletop game was often focused on large-scale battles involving armies, whose units were painted in uniform style. In the tabletop game, much like military uniforms in the actual world, these uniform design patterns helped to create a sense of group identity (for the painted miniatures on the table) and player identity for the painter/general. This is very distinct from the kind of individual expression fostered in role-playing games: uniform group identity versus individual expression.

Most MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft*, have an extensive range of options for virtually-distinct types of gear. Gear plays an important part in individual expression of identity. In contrast, the gear options in *Warhammer Online* are limited and often visually appear very similar. For example, there is little visible difference in the range of armour for the sorceress

avatar so that, despite changing armour, the avatar still appears relatively the same. While the option to dye items different colours allows for some variation and individual expression, items could only be visually altered in very controlled ways with dyes. The attempt on the developer's part to balance uniformity and individuality in expression of identity through physical customization has the effect of *Warhammer Online* avatars looking similar to their tabletop counterparts in terms of design and has partly defined how players interact with gear. While high-level, high-quality gear is essential in any MMORPG for utility and as a status symbol, gear in *Warhammer Online* is a signifier of player skill and awareness of "proper" armour configurations maximized for efficiency. Without great variation in gear, items such as armour in the game tend to be understood hierarchically: by examining another player's equipment pieces, it is thought to be possible to determine how skilled a player they are.



Figure 1.2 - Character window (left) with equipment slots surrounding avatar portrait (screenshot by author)

Following *Warhammer: Fantasy Battles*, *Warhammer Online* is a very PvP player-versus-player-oriented game. Unlike other MMORPGs that rely on social groupings to overcome computer opponents (player-versus-environment (PvE): *Lord of the Rings Online* is one such game), *Warhammer Online* goes to lengths to pit players of different factions against each other. With the use of the open grouping system, where anyone can join a group (instead of having to ask for invitations as common in other MMORPGs), large armies of players can quickly form and coordinate. The division of the warband into smaller party units under a single group leader is reminiscent of the army structure of the tabletop game. Theoretically the group leader could give orders to the players under his (temporary) command to coordinate an effective tactical offensive; in practice, on *Phoenix Throne*, individual differences between players often led to internal social friction and the illusory nature of the command structure was quickly realized as MMORPG players are not actual military units. From borrowing structural and design elements from lineages of both tabletop wargames and pen-and-paper role-playing games, the history of *Warhammer Online* is a distinct blend among MMORPGs.

1.3 Interface & Intersection

With a brief understanding of the historical design forces that shaped *Warhammer Online*, we can now turn to looking at how players physically interact with the game. An examination of the hardware requirements of an MMO may seem an overly basic introduction, but "video game" is a broad category that encompasses multiple platforms, and the platform should be an integral part of any analysis of MMOs. Unlike console video games (i.e.: Playstation 3, Nintendo Wii, etc), computer games utilize the existing hardware of the computer to function. To interface with game means interfacing with the computer hardware; HIDs

(human interface device) are hardware such as the keyboard and mouse, which form the tools the player uses at a basic level to gain entry into a virtual world. In an act of what might be construed as digital shamanism, the keyboard, mouse and monitor become magic objects; they keep the same basic functions that they have in non-game online space (i.e.: keyboard for typing messages) but they gain a new layer of meaning for the player. In *Warhammer Online* the keyboard controls not only text-based communication within the game but also partly controls physical movement of your avatar within the virtual world and becomes a weapons arsenal extension of your hand. Where a player could imagine a fireball emanating from the fingers of his wizard character in a pen-and-paper role-playing game, the push of a button (or "hotkey") with one finger on the keyboard manifests the same result visibly in the game space. Tandem coordination between a player's left hand on the keyboard and right hand on the mouse determine where and how an avatar moves and looks around. Rather than watching a narrative unfold on a screen, the monitor becomes the eyes of your avatar; while you can change the camera angle in *Warhammer Online*, most players I talked to play in close third-person view, meaning that while you see your avatar on the screen you do not have omnipotent powers of observation – the monitor only displays content in the direction your avatar is pointed.

The new layer of game meaning utilizing your HIDs is also highly customizable; *Warhammer Online* is a game of very fast and often confusing combat sequences separated by long periods of waiting around. To respond to the differing needs of this type of game, players are able to remap their keyboard to configure the layer of game meaning however they see fit. When I first started playing computer games, as a noob,³ I used the arrow keys for movement

³Derogatory term for a new player

and the numpad for activating spells and abilities. By the end of my fieldwork in *Warhammer Online* (still a noob, but getting better) I utilized the commonly-used WASD keys for movement and created custom bindings for the surrounding keys. This layer of meaning is what connects the HIDs to the GUI (graphical user interface) of the game. The GUI is the virtual control bars the player sees on the screen; it represents the graphical buttons that you virtually press when you physically press a keyboard key.

So you have mastered the mouse and can move your avatar around the virtual space on the screen. You have discovered that pressing the "I" key with your left hand causes your wizard to fling a fireball at a target that you selected with your mouse with your right hand. Now you take a closer look at the GUI, the visual clutter of bars, boxes, statistics and colours all relaying you different kinds of seemingly arcane information. Compared to using the keyboard to move forward and backward, the GUI at first glance seems daunting; MMORPGs are notorious for providing the new user with sensory overload. The GUI represents the second level of control mechanisms that the player has to master in order to interact effectively.

At any given time, the GUI might consist of: 1) your current amount of hitpoints (health of your character) and stamina (required for actions and spells); 2) positive and negative buffs affecting you; 3) your character experience points progression bar; 4) renown rank progression bar; 5) influence rewards bar; 6) a map displaying your location relative to the movements of nearby allies and foes; 7) the warband screen displaying the names, classes and health of other group members; and 8) the cast and cool down times of your spells, not to mention the endlessly scrolling chat window that separates into several different colour-coded channels. Your mouse and keyboard allow you to interact not only with the world but also with your GUI, which is

thankfully highly customizable in *Warhammer Online*; players can opt to resize, move or delete GUI objects however they fit to streamline their own personal play style. Since *Warhammer Online* is primarily a combat-oriented virtual game world, all of this coordination and timing between hardware and GUI is learned during the confusion of battle. There is no pause button. Virtual battlefields here require fast and precise movements to not only avoid death, but to deal it. In addition, you will likely also be using voice chat and have a group of people yelling in your ear. To someone looking over the shoulder of a player (a social phenomenon that I will return to later on), the game basically looks like a lot of confused flashing lights interspersed with occasional downtime and standing around.



Figure 3.3 - Hotkeys circled in orange (screenshot by the author)

1.4 Scholarly Context

A review of the literature concerning identity in virtual worlds is complicated by a number of factors including: disciplinary territoriality, lack of a standardized lexicon, academic misunderstandings of the theories and methodologies of other disciplines, and the constantly-changing nature of the medium itself. Despite the recentness of their development and breakthrough into popular culture, there is a growing body of literature focused on MMORPGs specifically and still more on virtual worlds in general. While the first MMORPGs were launched in the early 1990s, most scholars trace their development through text-based MUDs and pen-and-paper role-playing games. These have at times been considered “virtual worlds” and that definition has even been expanded to include literary, imaginary and any religious spaces (Bittarello 2008; Boellstorff 2008). In viewing the historiography of virtual worlds scholarship, the temporal link between the work and the state of technology and media must be taken into account. In his ethnography on *Second Life*, Boellstorff quotes Hine’s (2005) assertion that scholarly research on virtual worlds can be divided into two phases: the first being dominated by psychological approaches using controlled experiments, while the second phase has seen a shift towards qualitative methodologies (Boellstorff 2008: 53). In my own review of the literature, I note the increasing number of ethnographies being published but do not necessarily see the dominance of quantitative studies dissipating. With so many different disciplines with their respective approaches interested in virtual worlds, the “field” is increasingly being viewed as necessarily interdisciplinary (Boellstorff 2006), which has brought an important range of perspectives to studying the virtual but has also resulted in the defining and re-defining of the

same basic phenomena: where I employ the term "MMO" as synonymous with "virtual world," some authors have divided "virtual worlds" from "game worlds" (Spence 2009), proposed differences between "MMOGs" and "MMOs" (Learning 2009), or created new terms such as "MMP" (Seay et al. 2004) and "collaborative virtual environments (CVEs)" (Brown and Bell: 2004). In arguing for an anthropological approach to virtual worlds, Boellstorff draws a distinction between combat-oriented and non-combat-oriented worlds and notes the significant difference of the existence of a game structure, rules and narrative that do not exist in virtual places such as *Second Life*, but he nevertheless views both as "virtual worlds" (Boellstorff 2008: 23). While I certainly understand the need for a common lexicon for furthering interdisciplinary cooperation, I also do not see a problem using the popular terminology associated with these virtual spaces. In keeping with Boellstorff's example, rather than imposing a specific academic terminology to describe a phenomenon of popular culture I watched and listened through participant observation and asked my informants what they called these spaces. I most commonly heard *Warhammer Online* referred to as "the game;" an "MMO;" an "MMORPG;" or "the world." I came to the conclusion that to the players I talked to and got to know, proper classification was of little importance as what they enjoyed was the experience.

The development of MMORPGs is a curious thing; their existence is enabled by computer technology, which makes them products and processes of online media. Yet, as discussed earlier, while they clearly share technological and gameplay similarities with video games they also owe debt to older pen and paper role-playing games, notably *Dungeons & Dragons*. This has allowed for these games to be approached from a myriad of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, computer science, anthropology, game studies, media studies,

cultural studies and folkloristics. Fine's (1983) study of role-playing games looked at the pen-and-paper variety of RPGs as subcultures, and was one of the early scholarly works on these games, or, more accurately, on the players. Using ethnographic techniques, Fine showed that beyond being mere entertainment, the players of these games constituted a subculture and each game itself created a social world (1983, 72). As noted above, some authors choose to differentiate between game and non-game "social" worlds, but as Fine's work suggests, this false dichotomy is misleading as games can be social worlds.

In his introduction to *Signifying Identities*, Cohen asks the important question "Are some identities more authentic than others? What are the conditions of authenticity?" (Cohen 2000, 3). He poses the question in reference to Frederik Barth's (1969) seminal work on ethnicity and groups, but it is also significant when asked of virtual identities. Are virtual social relations so different from their actual world counterparts that they require entirely new theoretical frameworks to understand them? Of course not: as products of culture and technological media of communication, virtual worlds are developed and inhabited by humans coming from actual world societies. Nor, however, are virtual social relations a mirrored reflection: actual world sociality cannot entirely explain virtual social relations (Boellstorff 2008, 63). Cohen's question encapsulates the essence of the debate in early internet scholarship concerning whether virtual spaces could develop as valid communities (Donath 1998; Foster 1997; Light 1999; Rheingold 2003; Wellman 1999). The term "virtual" itself offers a double meaning: it is commonly used in contemporary society to refer to "digital," but in doing so also implies an "almost" or "not quite real" statement (Boellstorff 2008). It is this underlying implication of ephemerality that creates the conceptual false dichotomy between the "real" and the "virtual." This is precisely why I

suggest that experiential ethnography is one of the most effective methodologies for exploring and analyzing virtual relations.

The arguments against the validity of virtual communities can be reduced to concerns over supposed inauthenticity. Foster argued that virtual relations were shallow and a façade (1997, 29) and Light suggested that virtual communities existed only as Marxist false consciousness (1999, 122). While a Marxist interpretation of virtual worlds in terms of serving a hegemonic power structure is intriguing, similar arguments have been made about subcultures that, while possibly accurate, do not invalidate the experiential social meaning for their members. Wellman and Gulia proposed that the term "community" be redefined so that it does not specify geographic space but a set of social networks (1999, 177). It is important to note that the scholars here all come from different disciplines and theoretical backgrounds that employed differing definitions of what was being analyzed as shared terminology.

The concept of community has been interpreted and applied in different fashions by various scholars: where Foster, Wellman and Gulia were writing of the sociological definition of "community," Anderson famously applied the concept in less concrete physical terms. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson describes community as a shared imagining of members from a national group separated by vast geography but connected through media (Anderson 1989). In this way, Anderson described how a contemporary nation functions on a conceptual level and essentially represents a loosely-knit group. One criticism of this work was that it never fully explained how members of such a diffusely-related group could be individually motivated to die for their imagined community. The answer to this lies not in redefining the concept of a community but in the nature of the interpersonal relationships that constitute it.

Folklorists have long been aware that groups are not homogenous bounded entities, nor static and tied to geography. Noyes examines the relative density of groups and expounds a spectrum from loosely-knit social networks to close community (Noyes 2003). She applies social network theory to analyze more deeply the dynamics of social relationships within a face-to-face physical community. The physical basis for the internet, meaning geographically-diverse servers and users, creates a situation where non-face-to-face communication is facilitated and necessary. As products reliant upon internet technology, virtual worlds are very much "places" floating in the ocean of cyberspace, kept aloft by a foundation of network ties – both computer signal and social signal. Rheingold makes the argument that dismissing virtual relationships as "shallow" when compared to actual world relations misses the complexity of the relationships (Rheingold 2006, 51). As an imagined community, users of *Warhammer Online* are connected through media – in this case, the world itself – and, like an imagined community, the average user only ever interacts with a small percentage of the population that is said to make up the nation (or virtual world), and rarely knows actual world information about fellow players. Imagined communities are also virtual in the "almost real" sense yet command powerful relationships. *Warhammer Online* is a synthetic world in that it was constructed by a development company, but it functions as a place in which players share real experiences that they carry back to the actual world.

Academically, contemporary scholars in the social sciences acknowledge that the term "authenticity" is problematic but it is nevertheless a popular concept that underlies basic discussion and understanding of virtual worlds. Folklorists have long been aware of the conceptual baggage attached to judgments of "authenticity" in the late 19th Century construction

of "the folk" as a "natural" or "organic" group who live traditional lifeways as cultural artefacts of a more "authentic" past. Bausinger engages with this view in *Folk Culture in a World of Technology*, in which he examines the interface between folk and technology (Bausinger 1990). He questions the conceptual dichotomy between mechanization and the simple, rural folk (1990, 8) and goes on to argue that technology becomes naturalized into folk culture and is then not only a subject of folklore but also used as a means to spread folklore, and, by extension, the folk world, spatially and temporally (1990, 43). I find Bausinger's work highly significant in light of conceptualizing virtuality and situating virtual worlds within social history. Bausinger's work is useful in a broad sense of constructing a conceptual framework from which to understand folk/players relation to technology and the cultural implications that relationship suggests. As noted earlier, semantically embedded in the word "virtual" is the connotation of "almost real" and as entirely synthetic products globally accessed through technological means virtual worlds are perhaps the ultimate in mass production. Bausinger's conclusion, that technology does not destroy folk culture but instead adds new dimensions to it (1990, 23), speaks both to the virtual community debate and to the social effect of technological mediation.

We may discuss the imagined community and virtual social network of *Warhammer Online* as an abstract group, but it is the relations between members that construct such networks. By their very commercial and programming design, MMOs are inherently social and if that sociality is indeed experientially "real" enough to develop community, it follows that the expression of identity on both individual and group levels is worth study as sociocultural product. Berger and Del Negro explore the phenomenological construction of self and the role that perception plays in identity (Berger and Del Negro 2004). Their work on phenomenology is

discussed in the third chapter, and adapted to interpret the player-avatar relationship and perception of virtual self.

Where "virtual" can mean "almost real," the actual-virtual divide is a conceptual distinction made by scholars which does not necessarily exist in the same way for players. Barth argues that drawing distinctions does not necessarily also imply a boundary delineation (1969, 17); he cites examples from his anthropological fieldwork of groups, such as the Basseri, who do not cognitively conceptualize boundaries as tied to geography or property but instead as ever-shifting. The conventional Western notion of "boundary" often leads to conceptions and discussions of structuralist binaries and dichotomies. In her ethnography of the MMO *Everquest*, Taylor significantly argues that the actual-virtual dichotomy is a false one, with players negotiating the gaps between the real and virtual (Taylor 2006, 19). Games studies scholars have also grappled with the concept of boundaries in virtual worlds; in two recent works, Lastowka adopts a structuralist approach that argues underlying rules and the "magic circle" boundary is necessary for an MMORPG to function (Lastowka 2009), while Consalvo employs a contextualist approach that concludes that boundaries do not account for multivocality of meaning (Consalvo 2009). If, as Barth suggests, boundaries are a cultural production of lived experience and not a universal structure (Barth 1969, 23), then the actual-world division is less a fixed boundary and more a Western conceptual academic distinction. Boellstorff has noted the porous quality of this distinction and argues that a reciprocal relationship exists between the actual and virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008). Applying Berger and Del Negro's phenomenology of self perception to this issue suggests that this distinction is not only porous but an existential creation that varies from player to player and is easily and frequently traversed.

If Berger and Del Negro's theories on self-perception can be adapted to describe the immersive perceptual and experiential experience of indentifying as an avatar, Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* may likewise describe the performance of these virtual self-identities (1959). Goffman employed a theatre model to illustrate presentation through social interaction; the construct of a theatre also functions well in describing player-avatar-audience relations in virtual worlds. Goffman's assertion of the agency of the actor in choosing a costume to present is borne out in *Warhammer Online* by players' construction of themselves as avatars. Grimes' work on the phenomenology of masking also suggests that the costume becomes less a material disguise and instead the wearer appropriates its power through assuming its identity (Grimes 1975). According to Goffman actors are simultaneously both performers and audience (Goffman 1959), which speaks not only to individual construction of avatars but especially to performance of role-playing in which all actors simultaneously form an audience for themselves. This shifting of perception (Berger and Del Negro 2004) to construction of a "costume" (Grimes 1975) and performance of this (Goffman 1959) is essentially a dynamic transformative process of identity grounded in the experiential, which echoes the work of Viveiros de Castro on Amazonian perspectivism and the fluidity of the nature-culture boundary that allows for shamans to transform their biology instead of soul to not only identify with but become their "mask" (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

This concept of transformative identity created through lived experience and performed in a virtual place is central to this thesis and an idea that I will develop further in the subsequent chapters. The purpose of this introduction was to briefly familiarize non-gamers with the concept of massively multiplayer online role-playing games and situate myself within a scholarly context

of preceding research on virtual worlds while describing the theories and notions I will be employing. The following chapters are concerned with reflexive disclosure of my own experience and methodology; social performance of identity in *Warhammer Online*; avatars as transformative commodities; and the folklore of cheating.

Chapter 2: Virtual Reflexivity

2.1 Ethnographic Context

When I launched *Warhammer Online* for the first time in January 2009, the game had servers divided into three geographic regions: North America, Europe and Oceania. This is standard convention in most MMOs, intended to cluster players who share roughly the same time zones and language. While I did encounter the occasional Briton and Australian on the North American servers I selected, the majority of players I interviewed or who mentioned their nationality in public chat were from the United States or Canada. These server divisions also represented where the game was released and who had access to it. While each player was allowed to create avatars on different servers, each server maintained its own unique community and none more so than the role-playing server Phoenix Throne on which I spent most of my time.

So how did I get there? After subscribing a monthly fee to development company Mythic Entertainment, I downloaded the *Warhammer Online* "client," which, in computer jargon, refers to an end-user application that communicates with the main server over the internet. Unlike single-player computer games, MMOs are not located wholly on the player's hard drive but instead function in a relationship between computer and server, player and developer. Double-clicking on the *Warhammer Online* desktop shortcut loads the "patcher," a gateway application in which you identify yourself with a password as it "patches" your game; patches are packages of changes to the game's programming that the developers occasionally send out to players. Patches can change as little as tweaking how much damage a particular weapon does to world-

altering effects, such as overhauling graphics or adding new areas to explore. Once fully patched, I click "play" and am launched into the character selection screen in which I choose which avatar to manifest as. After selecting my Sorceress, I am confronted with a loading screen until my avatar flickers to life wherever I left her. Up until this point, the player interacts with the world in the same way they interact with webpages: through on-screen buttons. When the avatar appears, the keyboard and mouse control configuration automatically activates and the player immediately becomes the avatar. Instead of the user interacting human-to-software or website through the mouse and keyboard, the player interfaces with the world through the avatar and with the avatar through the mouse and keyboard; what is added here is a second event of mediation. This is the instant where virtual presence is attained; when a player assumes control of an avatar he or she also assumes new self-identity (Berger and Del Negro 2004) and individual perspective (Kerr 2009).⁴

In a paper exploring the potential application of criminal law in virtual worlds, Kerr establishes "virtual perspective" as the referring to the on-the-ground perspective of the player, who almost views the world through the eyes of the avatar; this term is meant to distinguish between an etic perspective and experience of sitting at a computer and an emic one of actually being in the game (Kerr 2009). I go into greater depth involving Berger and Del Negro's discussion of self-experiential identity in the next chapter, but suffice it to say here that experiential meaning is critical to understanding how players interact with the virtual world. The

⁴The 2009 film *Avatar* has gone some measure to popularizing the connection between the video game avatar and perceptual embodiment and immersion. When *Warhammer Online* players log into their accounts they become their avatars in a virtual space. The film saw the actors temporarily transferring their consciousness to a different biological entity in the actual world. Further work on this topic would be intriguing.

immersive quality of manifesting as an avatar is what yields the virtual perspective that players experience.



Figure 2.1 - Wandering the virtual lands (screenshot by author)

With virtual presence established, the world of *Warhammer Online* opens up before you. As your chosen and constructed avatar, you can go anywhere. Newly-minted avatars begin in the starting zone; each server of *Warhammer Online* consists of a world map that is divided into four "tiers," which are zones based on avatar level. Tier 1 is reserved for avatars between level 1 and 12; with a maximum attainable character level of 40, this division functions to separate higher and lower-level avatars to avoid higher levels easily killing lower levels, known as "ganking." An avatar's level increases by gaining "experience points," which are rewards from completing

tasks ("quests") or killing enemies, either computer-controlled non-playable characters (NPCs) or players of the opposing faction.

According to the lore set down in the game manual, the virtual world is bitterly divided between two warring alliances: Humans, Elves and Dwarves united as the "Forces of Order" struggling against the onslaught of the Chaos (evil Humans), Dark Elves and Greenskins (Orcs and goblins) that march under the banner "Forces of Destruction." Players from each faction can go anywhere on the world map, though some places like enemy cities can be hazardous. Each tier consists of two geographic regions on the map, which are divided into "PvE" and "RvR": player-versus-environment (PvE) is a common MMORPG designation for areas in which players fight NPCs, including monsters, bandits, wild animals, etc., while Realm-versus-Realm is *Warhammer Online*-specific lingo for player-versus-player (PvP) areas that are reserved for combat between players. Learning suggests that MMORPGs are largely defined by which paradigm they are constructed around, PvE or PvP (Learning 2009, 12); *Warhammer Online* includes both, but the development and marketing focus was centred on PvP. PvE quests are programmed into the game and are offered by NPCs. They might include having to hunt "x" number of dangerous wild animals or carry important supplies or messages to NPC commanders across zones.

The RvR I participated in was quest-less, player-directed and driven; each RvR area had a "Fortress" and a number of smaller "Battle Objectives" (BOs), which are strategic structures on the battlefield whose capture and defence yielded experience points. Unlike PvE quests that direct players to specific areas to conduct particular tasks, RvR combat between opposing players is conducted by large groups led by individual players. Formation of groups, strategy and

tactics are developed entirely by players and passed on as folklore of RvR by veteran players. The most common group size in RvR during my fieldwork was the "warband," which consisted of up to twenty-four players under a single leader and could be set to "open" to enable any random player in the geographic region to join. The successful assault, capture and defence of fortresses and BOs is a matter of individual player skill, group leadership and strategy that translated into social capital and was often a matter of pride. Individual players that built reputations as good leaders often ended up in charge of warbands and their names became a draw for players in the area to join the group. Large-scale battles could include any number of warbands operating together, resulting in hundreds of players on each side.

Beyond the functional open warbands, guilds are the most common type of group; a guild is a semi-permanent group of players, created and run by players, consisting of a core group of anywhere from ten to hundreds of people that regularly play together. Guilds are important in social worlds like MMOs, where the individual player cannot overcome enemies and level by him or herself; guilds could be any size and run in any fashion, from strict military-like hierarchy and discipline, to close-knit and family-like to relaxed and fun-centric, but each one carries a reputation that sets some as elite with much sought-after exclusive membership. Where warbands are contextual and transitory, guilds are more permanent structures that often form the source of socialization of new players and transmission of folklore about the world. In looking for informants and folklore, I focused on the spaces where I found the most consistent social dynamics between players. As such, this thesis is more concerned with guilds and warbands in role-playing and RvR, which is more or less aligned with how *Warhammer Online* was designed and is played.



Figure 2.2 - Small warband defending a BO (screenshot by author)

2.2 Virtual Lifeways

Since MMORPGs have no ending, i.e. they perpetually exist, as the role-playing element dictates a character that advances over time through experience, both the player and avatar have a life course. The delineation of the life course of the individual is a cultural construct of traditional patterns that mark points in development and ascribe sociocultural meaning to them. As a game, the development of avatars in *Warhammer Online* through gaining experience points that unlock new abilities and powers is marked by numerical "rank" (known as "level" in most other MMORPGs), which is the measure of experience points that the avatar has attained. In

distinguishing MMORPGs from other non-game worlds, Boellstorff noted that character levels structured the virtual life course by acting as a measure of online experience (Boellstorff 2008, 123). This is true in a technical sense, that higher level avatars have access to more powerful abilities and equipment; socially, assumptions are sometimes made of high level avatars. When I was active in the lower tiers, arguments in warbands often degenerated into competitions of social capital and skill, with at least one participant citing the fact that they (allegedly) have one or more "level 40s" (40 being the maximum level). It takes a considerable time commitment and effort to attain level 40, and so asserting the possession of multiple level 40 avatars implies that the player is serious by way of time commitment (during which time skill is learned) and that they possess both technical skill at playing to be so successful and cultural knowledge in the form of tactics and efficient character design.

Upon meeting my informant Norm, one of the first things he told me was that he was a "hardcore" player and had four maximum level avatars. While we were explicitly discussing time commitment, he used this measure of effort spent to validate and legitimize his opinions. Upon gaining a level during a social event other players would congratulate you and while some things can be inferred from level, during my fieldwork this measurement did not necessarily always reflect experience. Boellstorff also noted that some of the *Second Life* residents he met during his fieldwork had multiple accounts, avatars or had multiple people in the actual world sharing a virtual avatar: this, he argues, means that virtual life courses could not be accurately mapped on to actual world lives (Boellstorff 2008, 123). My informants Devin and Scott routinely shared avatars, either playing each other's while the other was away or both in the same actual room with one playing while the other advised. While this "over-the-shoulder" play

experience is outside the scope of this thesis, it is a perspective that is rarely addressed in scholarship on virtual worlds. Levels may structure the life course for an individual avatar, but as a player inhabiting that avatar social experience is not defined by experience points. My informant "R" had never had a rank 40 avatar when I interviewed him and had been playing since the game launched; he was less interested in attaining the highest level than he was in developing his avatar, his background story for role-playing and "perfecting" his avatar as he envisioned it. While he did not have a single level 40 avatar, he had had over nine previous characters; his experience with *Warhammer Online* was considerable but was not measureable by the structured institution of levels.

By the end of my fieldwork I was hearing people in warbands voicing their dislike of higher-level tiers and groups. Players would intentionally try to keep their avatars from levelling in order to stay in lower tiers, where they argued it was simply more fun without the emphasis on tactics and social politics that came to dominate Tier 4. Players progress by learning technical skills in manoeuvring the avatar, timing and effective ability combinations, strategies and tactics and how to play your character and group role "right." These skills are learned socially through groups and over time, so a level 40 avatar *should* be socially, culturally and tactically competent. With multiple avatars and an infinite number of cultural and social experiences, the virtual life courses of players are complex processes that contribute to players' ever-shifting identities.

Identity in *Warhammer Online* is a fluid concept. While a player may create multiple avatars and decide to play each one as an entirely separate entity apart from the others, they are an example of Boellstorff's assertion that while place may change to adapt to a new medium

time remains constant: a boundary-marker between the virtual and actual (2008, 92). In MMORPGs time and identity are linked in different ways than in non-MMORPG worlds like *Second Life*. Time as I am employing it here represents a measure of progression as a player advances through multiple lives of avatars. For my informant "R," avatars represented the search for the "perfect" character design that not only played effectively socially but, more importantly, reflected him in the way he wanted. My first character was a short, stout Dwarf Ironbreaker named Belkard. In this, my first foray in the world of *Warhammer Online* and MMO culture in general, I was completely lost. I remember this feeling distinctly. As my fieldnotes from the excursion read: after the initial trouble in navigating both the GUI and the avatar himself, I ran into more trouble when faced with how to interact with the people milling about around me with what my inexperienced eye perceived as purposefulness. Now, over a year later with experience gained through playing a number of different avatars under my belt, I look back and see the mistakes I made in my timid socialization. I do not remember the avatar beyond what is recorded in my notes and my memory of the experience. This axe-wielding scarred Dwarf was, for me, a learning avatar: I eventually stopped playing him and created new characters, eventually deleting him months later. The eventual death of that avatar represented both my own progression through time as a player as well as my eventual socialization and acceptance into the culture. Very few players keep the first character they create. In my incarnation as a Dwarf I began to construct an identity, but that identity morphed into new avatars. For a random player in the game looking on, my Dwarf stumbled through his early quests and eventually disappeared. They would not see me create a new character but the disappearance of the Dwarf (aside from likely going unnoticed due to my initial lack of social contacts) would not be viewed as out of the

ordinary. Adapting Boellstorff's concept of time in virtual worlds for an MMORPG, players inhabit the same "place" over time, but through different incarnations; some of these are contemporary with each other in the case of "alts" (multiple, alternate avatars), but the effect of time in MMORPGs generally means the continual construction of new and different identities in a flow of avatars, and through them, a flow of identity. This is not to place emphasis on the player over the avatar or suggest that the last "main" someone plays represents the evolutionary progression of their identity, but rather to suggest that identity in MMORPGs does not have to be fixed in time or in space but is related to both. An avatar represents an instance of identity as constructed by a player, which carries social implications for socialization of players.

2.3 Reflexivity

In employing participant observation during my fieldwork I as an ethnographer was impacted by, and impacted in return, the social lives of the people that I met, interviewed and played alongside. Since any good ethnography is constructed through balancing the ethnographer's own interpretations with representing the voices of individual informants, it is vitally important to situate myself not only within scholarly and ethnographic contexts but also to highlight my own positionality through previous experience. Beyond my personal and academic interest in computer technology and the virtual worlds that it makes possible, I grew up with computers. Not initially in the home, but my elementary school had a computer lab of Commodore 64s. We played what passed for educational games on floppy disk. DOS command prompt was my friend. I remember when the school got the first Windows-based system: it had a CD-ROM drive. I did not get a family home computer until the ominous year of 1999; thankfully Y2K proved to be more corporate media hype than technological disaster. I had my own personal

desktop by 2004. After numerous upgrades, the original motherboard eventually died in the summer of 2009 (during my fieldwork). It seems fitting that declaration of personal bias and positionality for a virtual worlds-focused thesis begins with the specifications of my own magic portal to that Other world. I am running a custom-built desktop Intel CoreDuo 2.5 GHz CPU processor, 500GB 7200rpm SATA hard drive, ATI Radeon HD 4870 graphics card and 2 GB of DDR2 SDRAM in twin sticks. While this form of techno-positionality may not be common amongst academics studying video games, I suggest that it should be. A computer or console is your platform and portal through which we experience the game and worlds we talk about. Computer technology varies dramatically from household to household, resulting in users and players having often widely differing experiences of the same software. What a gamer looking at my computer specs would take from that is that while my "rig" can play current games well enough, it is not a high-end gaming machine.

I have been playing computer games since I first logged on to my first family computer, but logging into *Warhammer Online* for the first time was an entirely new gaming experience for me. I grew up playing any genre of video game except MMOs; it always seemed to me as though they were lacking in graphics and for years I steadfastly refused to pay a monthly fee for a game. It was academic interest in virtual communities that drew me into the diverse MMO game worlds. The majority of games that I gravitate towards are solo role-playing games and my previous experience with online games was limited to first-person shooters (such as *Star Wars: Battlefront* and *Call of Duty*) at which I usually perform disgracefully, and adventure-shooter games, like *Star Wars: Jedi Academy*. It was in this last game where I first encountered, and was embraced by, an online community. *Jedi Academy* had a multiplayer function that allowed a

limited number of people on a server to play through rotating maps, and was usually hosted by guilds of individuals. This was not a "persistent" world like an MMO, which runs 24/7 regardless of players, but the players in *Jedi Academy* were persistent: after a few weeks of frequenting the same servers, other players began to notice my screen name and play style and after a few months there was a set of regulars who inhabited certain servers at certain times, creating group boundaries based on familiarity and play experience. As I quickly realized when I entered *Warhammer Online* as an axe-wielding Dwarf in January 2009, in between being overwhelmed by the controls and by bloodthirsty enemies, this was not simply a multiplayer version of a solo role-playing game.

Initially, I had no friends. Naively, despite having read ethnographies emphasizing the contrary, I believed that I could log into *Warhammer Online* and almost instantly connect with friendly "natives" willing to become informants and welcome me into the guild communities. My experience showed me otherwise as no one responded to my questions in general region chat, let alone walked up to me and said "hello." This experience, while certainly not uncommon in some actual world societies, may be exaggerated by the veil of internet anonymity, which seems to discharge the person you are trying to engage with from any social obligation to respond. Even my direct "whispers" (text chat between only two players) were sometimes ignored. Feeling that Belkard was an ethnographic failure, I decided I needed to recreate myself (that and I had learned that I did not like the play style required by the Dwarf Ironbreaker class). I "rolled"⁵ a new and entirely different avatar on a different server. Looking back on my initial attempt to explore *Warhammer Online* and its culture, I realize that I simply did not know how to

⁵ A commonly used term meaning to create a new avatar, likely dating back to the days of pen-and-paper role-playing games that used dice rolls to create character attributes

"really" play or how to "really" create effective avatars. Over a year later, after my current guild moved a new MMO (a different fantasy-based world called "Aion"), I found myself remembering *Warhammer Online* as a very social and welcoming community. This later view stands in stark contrast to my initial experience; by June 2009, I had recorded in my fieldnotes that, "remembering my initial experience with my Ironbreaker, it is hard to believe that I am playing the same game."

MMOs are complex worlds and games. It takes significant time to learn how the game functions and to acculturate. Creating a virtual identity as expressed through an avatar can be fun and intriguing for some people, but in MMORPGs your identity is also strongly tied to your performance of skill at the game. It was with my second avatar, the aesthetically unpleasing and poorly-constructed wizard Thorodun (nicknamed "Thor," by most groups I played with since the name was too long to quickly type in chat) that I made social contacts and was invited to join guilds. Unlike my earlier Dwarf, the Bright Wizard class is considered a "caster" or RDPS (ranged damage per second); this means that, unless I went out of my way to design myself otherwise, I would be un-armoured (the term "squishies" is commonly used to refer to RDPS types) but capable of dealing large amounts of damage from a distance (leading to the nickname "glass cannons"). This also had implications for my play style with the expectation that I would endeavour to remain away from combat and use certain types of attacks at particular times and places: just as engaging enemy players in close combat would have been socially interpreted as a lack of skill and playing my class "wrong," a good wizard should similarly know that AoE (area of effect) spells are to be used in fortress defences but not in open field combat. I found that a basic proficiency with attack combinations (in terms of damage effects) and attack timing (some

abilities use "cooldown" timers determining when they will again become available, which means planning of timed-combinations of abilities is necessary) was not difficult to attain from play experience, but fine-tuning that proficiency required watching other players of the same class, the YouTube videos they posted and reading extra-game content, such as forum discussions and fan websites dedicated to class efficiency. Aware of my dual role as both player and ethnographer, which I had made public on my player profile, I was self-conscious of my performance and attempted basic internet searches for content on how to play more effectively. I started with the official *Warhammer Online* forum, which hosts a discussion webpage dedicated to RDPS classes. In contrast to my initial experiences in the game world, players would almost always answer questions posted to forum threads and often included links to videos on other websites. One such example is "WARDDB" (www.wardb.com), which is a database of game information and tools, such as the "career builder." The "career builder" allows you to further learn about classes and experiment with new ideas for improving the efficiency of your avatar through a simulation of every customization option. Websites like this were popular when I was conducting fieldwork, and most of my informants knew of them even if they did not visit them regularly.

Like external fansites, YouTube also proved to be a rich site of social discussion and debate. In many ways, YouTube felt like an extension of the world since players routinely recorded videos and posted them, often in response to other players' uploads. One YouTube video that I came across in May 2009 was entitled "How to not look like an idiot in tier 2" and depicted the author (user "insaneatneu") playing as a Bright Wizard. In his recorded performance, Insaneatneu emphasized the "proper" spells for wizards to use (suggesting that to

do otherwise would leave you “looking like an idiot”). I watched a number of videos like this, but I must confess that I could never get past the grainy low quality and never found them particularly informative. That said, other players including my own guild, frequently used videos as means of teaching and learning. My guild, “The Sons of Myrkwood,” kept a blog about their experiences in *Warhammer Online* and members traded links to such videos. For me, it was not so much the videos that influenced me and my play style but the social aspect of the guild.



Figure 2.3 - WARDB career builder simulating in-game avatar configuration options

Warhammer Online is designed as an inherently social game and it was through groups that I learned how to play. I read external websites and used ability simulators to experiment with crafting my avatar, but applying that knowledge within the context of group situations and fast-paced action became a social process. In PvE areas the developers instituted "public quests" (PQs) that allowed anyone in the area to participate. This set *Warhammer Online* apart from other MMORPGs that tend to require players to manually group themselves and invite others. I started grouping with small numbers of players in these quests and learning how to play the socially expected role of "the caster." I focused my research on PvP (player-versus-player) groups, however, since that type of game play was where I both found the most players and found myself leaning towards. PvP groups are also easy to create and join; anywhere from two to twenty-four players may group together in temporary pick-up groups, in order to work together to fight groups of enemy players. The "open warband" was the common standard of PvP groups and simply had a "join" button to gain entry (although players could be kicked out at the whim of the leader). PvP is competitive and during combat intra-group tensions can flare, so between heated arguments and the sometimes calm discussions I picked up a good deal of advice and ideas – in a word, folklore. While groups are simple to create, small groups do not always grow into full warbands and groups created by a single player often stayed as such until they were absorbed into larger groups or were dissolved. When I created Thorodun I had the fortune to be joined early on by my first two informants Devin and Scott, whom I am indebted for helping create groups with me and sharing their own experiences of learning the ins and outs of the world. Together we formed groups that often attracted more players than I would have done

alone and it was in many of these groups that we not only shared experiences but where I found the folklore of *Warhammer Online* players.

Devin, my brother, became one of my early informants in April 2009 when I flew to Toronto for fieldwork and he started playing *Warhammer Online*. He initially tended to play the heavily-armoured "tank" character types and gained significant social reputation on both Volkmar and Phoenix Throne through his respective avatars "Isildur," a Knight of the Blazing Sun, and "Nisimaldar," a Disciple of Khaine healing class avatar. He was frequently available for discussion of the game culture and through him I had access to not only my own network of friends and sources in the game world, but also his; I employed the snowball technique to find two more informants through him, "R" and Scott. "R" had significant influence on my *Warhammer Online* experience, as he played on the role-play server Phoenix Throne that I would eventually call home. He invited Devin and me, who had avatars on server Volkmar, to create new characters on Phoenix Throne and join his role-playing guild, "The Black Guard." It was on Phoenix Throne that I encountered role-playing and the social tension surrounding it that I became interested in and focused a large portion of this thesis on. I found the role-play server a very different social environment from the non-roleplay "core" servers I had previously inhabited: here were people who did not view the world as "just" a "mere" game but expanded the game narrative and wove in their own. As Thorodun on Volkmar, I had been recruited by guilds but the first guilds I really engaged with were on Phoenix Throne. I was quickly recruited by "The Black Hand," which was a large guild of over three hundred players; aside from a few core members, there was not a particularly strong sense of community that I could discern, although our members tended to stay together in groups like warbands. I regularly played

alongside a small group of Black Hand members and we were close to becoming a cohesive unit within the larger structure of the guild when one day the guild disappeared. Or, I should say that the members disappeared first. I never did learn exactly what happened, but by August 2009 the guild was losing members daily and no guild events were materializing. While I regularly chatted with the Black Hand members and they agreed to interviews, I could never get the majority of them to commit to a date and time.

Thankfully, my fieldwork was not place-dependent and by September 2009 I found myself back in St. John's, with months of participant observation and experience under my belt, but only half of my expected number of interviews and a disappearing guild. I was frustrated with the state of my research and joining new guilds was not generating the informants that I needed. In early September, I was logged in on Phoenix Throne as the Sorceress Moriquendlyn when I was approached by Cadrar, inquiring about the state of the Black Hand. It turned out he was the leader of the Sons of Myrkwod guild, which I joined and played with for months in *Warhammer Online* and continue to play with in Aion since the guild migrated. In a telling tale of virtual identity, I had actually been playing with Cadrar for months before I met him: I recorded numerous times throughout the summer in my fieldnotes of playing alongside Randthien, who was an "alt" avatar of Cadrar. While Randthien became a recognizable name to me, Moriquendlyn became the same to him since when he approached me as Cadrar he was somehow under the impression that he was recruiting my brother Devin. The Sons of Myrkwod has always been a relatively small guild consisting of a group of players who have played together through three different MMOs now; welcoming and patient, the Sons accepted me and it

was with them that I first used voice chat and added that dimension of communication to the game.

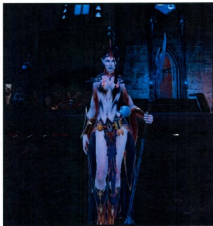


Figure 2.4 - My Dark Elf Sorceress, Moriquendlyn (screenshot by author)

Like The Black Hand, being on Phoenix Throne, the Sons of Myrkwood were a role-playing guild. Though I was completely unfamiliar with role-playing in MMORPGs and had not initially intended to conduct fieldwork in a role-playing community, role-playing came to form a key perspective in my discussion of virtual identity. Yet not all *Warhammer Online* players engage in role-playing, in fact the majority do not; I was initially plagued with doubt over how

my research could be representative of *Warhammer Online* players if I confined myself to a particular community. I make liberal use of the phrase "*Warhammer Online* players," but this implies a typology of group and an underlying academic classificatory system. The trend in game studies and sociological studies of MMOs has been to create player typologies (Bartle 1996; Schuuman et al. 2008) and assign motivations to people who inhabit virtual worlds. Yet if there is one element of identity that I found most strongly emphasized, it is individuality: whether you are creating arbitrary categories of motivation or combing through server data logs in order to establish objective and empirical cultural measurements, even from the few people that I spent months playing with and getting to know it was clear that everyone plays for their own reasons. For some people like the Sons of Myrkwood it is a fun weekly social gathering of friends; Devin was concerned with building reputation and social capital while Scott played for no other reason than sheer entertainment and occasionally ruining someone's day; Norm was a serious and hardcore player; "R" was indifferent towards the social element of the game and instead quested for the perfect avatar; for Lynda it was ultimately just a game, but an aesthetically pleasing one. Through the people who started as informants and became friends I learned, directly and indirectly from them, that assuming a "culture of gaming" perspective and imposing ostensibly objective classificatory systems would not speak to the culture of the virtual world and its inhabitants, nor would it help them speak.

I will go into depth in the following chapter concerning the social implications of role-playing and how others use it in performing identity, but here I will limit myself to describing my own experience with role-playing on *Phoenix Throne* as it subjectively relates to my perception of it as a social process. *Warhammer Online* hosted two dedicated role-play servers,

one of which was Phoenix Throne. As I mentioned above, it was through the advice of my informant "R" that I created the character on Phoenix Throne that would eventually become my "main" that I spent the most time playing. While I had played single-player role-playing genre computer games and was familiar with the idea of role-playing in passing, I was immediately uncomfortable when confronted with this on Phoenix Throne; playing single-player RPGs is a negotiation between player and software, but in MMORPGs role-playing becomes a social performance negotiated between player, software and audience. Subsequently, I found myself self-conscious of "speaking" (typing) as my avatar instead of as a player.

While everyone role-played slightly different, the identities from which players spoke their characters into creation were a mix of *Warhammer* franchise lore, other literary fantasy notions and personal conception. This was most pronounced in non-human races, particularly orcs and elves. I noticed that role-playing a human usually referenced The Empire, the Emperor, or notions of duty and righteousness; dwarves tended to speak with a rough approximation of a Scottish accent and focus on content involving alcohol consumption; elves of both moralities were long-winded and "noble" sounding with the dark elves advocating malicious acts; orcs and goblins tended to be the most prominently performed avatars with speech (text) visually altered to appear and be read as a British cockney accent and content-wise was minimalist and designed to appear dim-witted for humorous effect. As the goblin Blezkin noted, role-playing often had reasonable limits:

*"In the heat of battle it is sometimes hard to stay in character, unless you're an orc. Orc speech is faster to type than normal sentences.
 Charge = WAAAAAGH!
 New Tactics = WAAAAAGH!
 Spotted an enemy = WAAAAAGH!
 We need more people = WAAAAAGH!"*

Dying = Oh boss we're gettin shot up!" (Biezkin, comment posted to Warhammer Forums, June 09, 2009).

While it was often difficult to stay in character during combat, some people remained as their character even during moments of social conflict (such moments commonly occurred following a defeat). In August 2009 I was in a warband led by the orc healer Wzadakka and witnessed an argument that erupted over his leading and healing skills that ended in a player leaving. Wzadakka was admonishing the group for not listening during a battle in which Hcukox had died; Wzadakka and Jigsarnak both stuck to their character identities and interpreted Hcukox's clearly non-role-playing comments as role-playing and performed a response:

[09/08/14][17:59:01] [Warband][Wzadakka]: jo dumb gitsdont listen to me once
 [09/08/14][17:59:41] [1: Region][Hcukox]: in all for the good leading Wzadakka but not the
 put downs have a good one guys
 [09/08/14][17:59:58] [1: Region][Wzadakka]: if jodontwanna get put down its easy do what jo
 told!
 [09/08/14][18:00:48] [1: Region][Hcukox]: I was deep into the healers and you didn't heal
 good enough as i see it so maybe you should focus on the heals
 [09/08/14][18:01:09] [1: Region][Wzadakka]: hcukoxim da best healer in tier 3 so watch your
 language you incidentalmotling
 [1: Region][Hcukox]: its easy to point fingers is my point a good leader leads by example not
 griping
 [09/08/14][18:01:42] [1: Region][Jigsarnak]: That includes following da Leaderzordahz.
 [09/08/14][18:02:27] [1: Region][Jigsarnak]: we're on da same side boss
 [09/08/14][18:03:20] [1: Region][Hcukox]: its a game get over yourself, you do a good job
 leading no need to put people down im pretty sure we are all trying.
 [09/08/14][18:03:53] [1: Region][Jigsarnak]: ey ewe, e wazimputin ewe down
 [09/08/14][18:03:56] [1: Region][Wzadakka]: maybe you should try order!
 [09/08/14][18:04:05] [1: Region][Jigsarnak]: e was rallying the orc in ewe
 (Recorded from my in-game chat log; I have boldfaced the names for ease of reading)

Witnessing such exchanges was not uncommon and I quickly became used to seeing the “dialect” speech that players “spoke” in chat.



Figure 2.5 - View of the Inevitable City (screenshot by author)

To close this chapter on ethnographic experience and reflexivity, I will briefly describe a common day for me in *Warhammer Online*. My usual day started in the actual world morning with a cup of actual world tea, checking for update patches and logging into the virtual world. Once I materialized as my avatar, opening the “group” window quickly displayed how many other players were nearby and interested in grouping together. Pressing the “g” key on the keyboard and opening the guild window revealed the number of fellow guild members online and their current whereabouts. After taking stock of this information, the map window then

showed the combat hotspots – where large groups of players were engaged or fortifications that were under attack. More often than not, I found that large groups did not tend to accumulate on Phoenix Throne until the afternoon. While there were some notable exceptions to this, mid-morning warbands usually dissolved around noon with members citing lunch as cause but promising to return later.

Many mornings I logged into find the server largely empty; I used these downtimes for avatar maintenance. As your avatar gains levels, you unlock new abilities and equipment that must be purchased (using in-game currency) from NPC trainers and merchants. Some of these NPCs were located in warcamps (faction safe areas) but many were deliberately placed only in the capital. The capital city of the Destruction faction, “The Inevitable City,” was aesthetically designed by Mythic Entertainment to represent the seat of power of the dark gods of Chaos from *Warhammer* lore. As such, the traveler to the “IC” (as it was abbreviated in text chat) was confronted with a dark and confusingly abstract space in which madness was supposed to reign and monsters and tortured souls roamed. While players visited the various regions of the world following the social movements of warbands, the IC was a kind of anchor and safe haven where players regularly traveled. The IC boasted at least one of every type of NPC merchant or trainer and, importantly, the auction house. On slow mornings, I wandered the temporarily empty fields and mountain paths of *Warhammer Online*, but the IC was a common stop and the auction house a daily necessity.

If there was a crowd to be found in the IC, you would find it at the auction house. An average day would see people standing around in front of two NPCs, seemingly AFK (away from keyboard) but actually engaged in invisible (to you) trading. Most virtual worlds include

some form of economy, often reaching beyond the parameters of virtual coin and interfacing with actual world economics. Issues of gold farming and account selling will be examined in the fourth chapter. Players earn virtual currency, "gold," and items for completing tasks and dispatching enemies. The amount of gold and kinds of items that "drop" and are recoverable from deceased enemies are regulated by Mythic, but through the player-driven auction house the economy of *Warhammer Online* often faced such issues as inflation. Following the economic trends was a daily activity for some players like Devin, who employed a strategy of buying up gear at auction and re-selling it at a price he determined. One member of the Sons of Myrkwood had the potions market cornered for a few weeks in August 2009.

After avatar maintenance and auctioning, and still finding no group, I would break until later in the afternoon. Around 4:00 pm Eastern Time the server population tended to swell, with the occasional embittered comment citing (and lamenting) public school being let out for the day. While it was not within the scope of my research to investigate whether or not in actuality it was grade school children that swelled the server population, I recorded these claims instead as fascinating social statements. Perception of other players often involved allusions to their inferred actual world life and, especially during times of social tension, ageism was commonly employed as negative sanctions and insults. The evening-night RvR warbands were always the largest, with multiple groups taking the field and operating together almost every night. Whether I was grouping with my guild or simply following the "zerg"⁸ of warbands, the night tended to have more PvP action that drew the largest number of players and almost ways ran late into the next morning. By midnight there were often two or three warbands operating in RvR zones,

⁸The term "zerg" is used to refer to unusually large and unwieldy groups of players with the implication that skill falls to the wayside in lieu of sheer numbers. Intriguingly, the term comes from the 1998 strategy game *Starcraft*, in which the Zerg were a species of aliens whose tactical strategy involved overwhelming numbers.

especially on Friday and Saturday nights. The temporary boom of player activity continued past 2:00 am when the Pacific Time players began to log in *en masse* and sometimes continued well into the morning. With everyday being a slightly different warband, I finally understood how “hardcore” players like Norm could spend “some days up to twelve hours” in the world. During the summer months of my fieldwork I averaged 25-30 hours per week, which left me thrilled but exhausted from staring at a screen so long, but brought a bemused smile to Norm’s face.

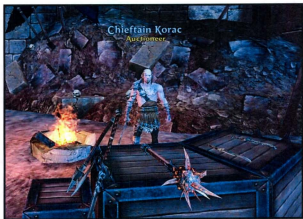


Figure 2.6 - NPC auctioneer in the Inevitable City that was usually surrounded by a crowd of players (screenshot by author)

Chapter 3: Identity Construction, Performance, and Experience

Handler's (1994) argument that to "talk about identity is to change or construct it" is perhaps emblematic of the difficulty faced by scholars discussing identity without the aid of a general theory, but also holds meaning for the effect of interactive new media on traditional theory. The scholarly study of "identity" has undergone conceptual shifts, moving from an Enlightenment notion of an inherited "essence" to a postmodern theory of fluidity and dynamism (Berger and Del Negro 2004, 128). The contemporary notion of identity has been described as situational and relational (Bauman 1972); historically emergent (Hall, 1996); an interpretative framework (Berger and Del Negro, 2004); and as complex dynamic process (Storey, 2003). There are many parallels of identity construction between the actual and virtual worlds. Users express identity in traditional as well as new ways that are specific to the medium. As a virtual game world, *Warhammer Online* is played and experienced through the expression of identity as the avatar. I analyze the process of virtual identity construction and performance to show how theory can be adapted to understand virtual culture and perhaps offer new ways of envisioning identity.

3.1 Layers of Group Identity

As Boellstorff has observed, the issue of culture in relation to virtual worlds may be approached in two ways; 1) a culture of gaming and 2) game culture (2006, 32). The first view operates at the level of actual world society, emphasizing the sociocultural function of virtual worlds and establishing "gamers" as a subculture. Magazines such as *PC Gamer* and television programs like *Pure Pwnage* support this view through identification of a "gamer" culture within

popular culture, and to reinforce that identity by creation of group-normative patterns of consumption through marketing. The second approach views a virtual world as a cultural context in itself. Just as there is significant reciprocal flow of ideas and content between the actual world and any given virtual world these two approaches are often complementary rather than antithetical. The macro-level "culture of gaming" perspective is useful for situating virtual worlds as sites of culture within the broader context of global popular culture, while viewing an individual game world as a valid cultural context itself is more suited to ethnographic methodology and understanding the relationship between the vernacular culture of the players and the commodification of the game development company. Setting out this broad distinction between different ways of approaching culture in virtual worlds establishes the conceptual framework against which I will explore the different "levels" of identity and group in *Warhammer Online*. While Boellstorff's terminology is eloquent, I will also employ Kerr's term "virtual perspective" to both relate to "game culture" and, specifically, to refer to the individual's perspective of the virtual world from "on the ground," as it were (Kerr 2009, 5).

The term "group" is used here to describe varying levels or layers of social network and community. I use the term in light of Noyes' definition of group as the productive tension between the social imagined community and the everyday network of contacts (Noyes 2003, 33). While Noyes' definition of "group" treats network as an actual-world face-to-face organization, scholars of virtual worlds have reconfigured social network theory in relation to virtual space arguing that face-to-face communication is not necessary or inherently superior. Writing on virtual social networks, Rheingold argues that such relationships are too complex to be arbitrarily classified as "shallow" or "deep" and that the weak ties critics point to are actually a strength of

the community, as they allow for more diverse forms of relationships (Rheingold 2006, 51). Explicit in Noyes' use of the "imagined social" is an adaption of Anderson's notion of "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006). This concept is useful in any discussion of group as it offers the understanding that that structure (though Anderson originally referred to nations) does not have to be face-to-face, but can be a nebulous shared notion that is simultaneously imagined by its members (Anderson 2006, 35). This effectively describes the loosely-knit "gamer" culture and the dense and often multiplex networks of guilds.

If a "culture of gaming" may be established within actual world society as a kind of broad, loose-knit group and its members known as "gamers," then, like the genres of folklore, gaming may be deconstructed into different sub-groups. Generic classification has largely fallen out of favour with contemporary folkloristics, for understandable reasons, yet some general terminology remains useful for facilitating discussion with the understanding that generic borders are porous and the system itself an academic imposition of ordering reality. Anyone who actively plays one or more video games may be considered a "gamer" in the broadest sense, but within that term groups tend to form around different platforms and "genres"⁷ of game types: First-person shooters, such as *Counterstrike* and the *Call of Duty* franchise, differ markedly in terms of gameplay from other "genres" like real-time strategy (i.e.: *Age of Empires*, *Command & Conquer*) or MMOs. These games are also experienced differently on different platforms, such as computers versus consoles. A gamer may then describe him or herself as a "computer gamer," and go on to detail genre of game that person tends to play (and, implicitly, buy and consume). In my fieldwork with *Warhammer Online* players, and some *World of Warcraft*

⁷ I use quotation marks to denote the lack of firm boundaries between these supposed genres that games are commercially divided into in some retail stores and marked as such on the retail box. There has also been an increase in hybridization between the traditional genres of video games over even the last five years.

players (both of which are MMORPGs), only one of my informants had not played any other genre of game (and that informant did not self-identify as a gamer). Yet while the boundaries are clearly porous between the "genres," MMORPG players nevertheless maintain a distinct lexicon and play style. This can be said for any other "genre" of game, but MMORPGs are also the most inherently multiplayer game type, with some "games" transcending that appellation to become non-game virtual worlds, such as *Second Life*.

MMORPGs constitute perhaps the genre with the most variation in gameplay, style and interaction. While MMORPG worlds share some generic similarities, they are far from being ubiquitous; while there is player flow between worlds, each world also exists as its own unique cultural context amidst the global flow of people, folklore and myriad other worlds of the cyberscape. *Warhammer Online* represents such a cultural context in and of itself. Approaching this MMORPG from the "gaming culture" perspective reveals the franchise, intellectual property rights and design elements that have been commercialized, but does not account for the intricacies and complexities of the world. It ultimately sacrifices small-scale group and individual experiential meaning in an attempt to create a generalizable rule or statistic. Sweeping generalizations are not the goals of ethnography, which seeks to interpret and understand culture on an intimate level.

Within *Warhammer Online*, culture is created through a reciprocal relationship between the players and the game development company. The virtual world was created by Mythic Entertainment, who had the licensing rights to develop an MMO from the *Warhammer* franchise created by Games Workshop. As mentioned earlier, the first incarnation of *Warhammer* was a tabletop miniatures war game that involves the collecting, painting and deploying of miniature

pewter and plastic models on an artificial "battlefield." In designing the game, Games Workshop drew on J.R.R. Tolkien and broadly on traditional European folktales and legends as evidenced in the names and appearances of the miniatures. Mythic Entertainment's role in shaping the culture of *Warhammer Online* is through coding the world itself, employing the now-commercialized folklore-derived art and narrative and making this accessible to players. Without players "inhabiting" it, however, the world would be nothing more than an elaborately-designed empty shell. At first glance it would appear an asymmetrical top-down power structure exists, with Mythic at the top and players at the bottom, but people inhabit not only the world as players but as users and consumers. With the high cost to develop and maintain,⁸ MMORPGs require a substantial number of subscribers (in the hundreds of thousands) to successfully make profit. Since MMORPGs are as much a process of playing as they are a play event (owing to the persistent nature of the game world and the around the clock server maintenance and support), good development companies are often easily approachable by players and institute continual patches and changes based on player feedback. This interaction between player and company allows the players a limited amount of agency in shaping their adopted world and represents one way in which the users, or "folk," appropriate the game and reconfigure it.

As a group, *Warhammer Online* players create and share their own meanings of the game; this folklore consists of cultural elements like social etiquette, *Warhammer*-specific lexicon, market prices, strategies and tactics, cheats and walkthroughs, social value systems, gameplay superstitions and group enforcement of "proper" avatar roles and identity. A player from *World of Warcraft* entering *Warhammer Online* for the first time may be immediately

⁸ MMORPGs are costly projects to design, develop, launch and then maintain: technical support, server maintenance, continuing content additions and patches all contribute to the cost.

familiar with the controls, which tend to be generic, but may not initially grasp things like social etiquette, combinations of abilities or where to stand during a keep assault. Players learn the game and its culture only through interacting with other players. As discussed in the first chapter, when I stepped into *Warhammer Online* for the first time as Belkard, I had read the manual that came along with the retail box but this did not help me. It was weeks before I fully learned the extent of the quests in the game and the lay of the land. It was, to my everlasting shame as a gamer, months before I learned how to effectively time and combine abilities in an attack. Reading player-created posts on the main chat forum and region walkthroughs, I gained the knowledge of both how I *could* play a Bright Wizard (my second avatar Thorodun) and how I was *expected* to perform in different situations.

Warhammer Online, like most MMORPGs, is divided into a number of different “servers”. Physically, these are actually different computer servers running identical copies of the game; the “massively multiplayer” aspect of MMORPGs is spread out across different servers to reduce load. During the period of my fieldwork, *Warhammer Online* had 300,000 players. All of these players loading on one server would severely lag the server and result in the game being unplayable.⁹ In the game world, servers might best be understood as alternate dimensions. As a player, you may have different avatars on different servers and each server is a slightly different experience of the game through interacting with different people. The majority of my fieldwork was conducted on the server Phoenix Throne. Unlike the majority of the “alternative universes,” this one was particularly different in that it was classed as a “role-play” server. That meant that the developers had specifically intended that it be used as a space where

⁹ A notable distinction to this rule is the sci-fi MMO *Eve Online*, which employs multiple servers feeding into one main server, so all players inhabit the exact same world space.

players were encouraged to engage in role-playing their character and protected such players from the potential abuse of non-role-players. This last issue will be addressed in more detail later on, as it significantly relates to performance of identity. The server that players play on, especially with their main,¹⁰ is a part of their identity.

Servers developed a collective identity, made up of that of all the inhabitants. Since *Warhammer Online* divided players into two factions, Order and Destruction (read: "Good versus Evil"), one side tended to have the advantage of numbers, and while this did shift over time, some servers became known for the dominance of one of the two factions. Servers also gained fame, or notoriety, for the play style or skill of their players. The power of group identity through the server was powerfully brought home for me when, at the end of my fieldwork, Phoenix Throne closed. Due to a declining subscriber base, Mythic Entertainment was forced to shut down sixty-four of their servers and merge the now-homeless players with other servers. Role-players were already a minority against non-role-players, which meant they were perhaps more keenly aware of their group identity, but some of them nevertheless prove an example as the forums were awash with posts from ex-Phoenix Throne players looking to join up with each other on different servers. Small cohesive pockets of players who played together on Phoenix Throne continue to exist on the remaining servers of *Warhammer Online*.

Within servers, the guild and the warband are the common groups that players interact with directly on a personal level. The guild is the smallest coherent and consistent unit of social interaction in *Warhammer Online*. As player "MacKnight" described guilds in terms reminiscent of the Durkheimian notion of the sum being more than its parts:

¹⁰ Main: a player's preferred character. Additional avatars are called "alts" (for "alternate").

"A guild is a living entity. Mythic recognizes this in the fact that they have guild experience points. A guild is more than just one or two people. More than the guild leader or officers. More than any single day. A guild is a creature comprised of every member within it. It breathes, lives, grows and shrinks based upon the actions of these members." (MacKnight, Warhammer Online Forums - Phoenix Throne, comment posted June 14, 2009).

These organizations include political hierarchies, with the guild leader at the head, but size can be anywhere from ten players to hundreds, and the atmosphere can range from military-like order to small and family-like groups of friends. Guilds are defined by their names, members and the heraldry that is depicted on a cloak worn by members. Guild reputation can be an important factor in inter-guild functions. During my fieldwork, I initially joined "The Black Hand," which was a three-hundred person guild that had a reputation of being active and competitive though too easy to join. I was later recruited into the "Sons of Myrkwod," which was a much smaller guild, but our members were well liked in large-scale alliance operations involving multiple guilds. Guild identity is a reciprocal process between player and group in that the player gains the reputation of the guild when interacting with other players, but it is the skills and exploits of the members that create the reputation. The concept of the guild was initially similar to that of a gang in that early multiplayer games offered no support for player organizations, resulting in player-created and regulated groups. The guild has since become institutionalized by MMORPGs like *Warhammer Online* in which it is a critical fixture.

In addition to guilds, the "warband" is the other common group feature in *Warhammer Online*. Handler's statement that, "groups are not bounded objects in the natural world. Rather, they are symbolic processes that emerge and dissolve in particular contexts of action" (Handler 1994, 30) applies interestingly here; if we replace "natural" with "virtual" the statement describes the symbolic identity of guilds but goes farther in terms of warbands as processes. Warbands are mobile groups of up to twenty-four players (consisting of four six-person "parties"

that can operate independently of the warband) most often employed in RvR. Sometimes a guild might field a guild-only warband, but in my experience warbands tended to be "open," which is a setting allowing anyone of the same faction in the same region to join (and leave) as they please. This made warbands the virtual equivalent of pick-up groups, and brought with it the benefits and problems of throwing strangers together in a group in a combat situation under a single leader. The warband leader was a position both revered and reviled. Some players revelled in being able to issue commands to other players and direct the force of the entire warband. If operations went poorly, however, the warband leader often bore the brunt of the defeated players' ire. I saw many players, myself often included, turn down leadership¹¹ and wait for one of the few celebrated veteran leaders on the server to arrive. Returning to Handler, the warband does not so much function as group identity but acts as a social and symbolic process that enforces performance of a particular kind of identity and acts as a space to transmit cultural knowledge. This conception of the warband as process will be discussed later on; this section has been concerned with describing the layers of broad and general group identity that situate the player as a gamer, and the following sections will engage with the player-avatar relationship on an individual level and social interaction.

¹¹ Without making an overly complicated explanation, warband leadership is randomly decided if the current leader leaves the group without appointing a successor.



Figure 3.1 - Mounted warband waiting for the order to move out (screenshot by author)

3.2 Phenomenology of the Virtual Self

In the third chapter of *Identity and Everyday Life*, Berger and Del Negro apply phenomenological theory to expressions of the self in everyday life (2004). By problematizing perception of the self, they employ a folkloristic approach to the experience of the self. Their goal with the argument concerns how metal music is perceived using a comprehensive structure of focus/fringe/horizon and uses this structure to describe how the self is conceptualized in relation to the performance (Berger and Del Negro 2004: 86). Berger and Del Negro use case studies of actual world activities and performances, such as music concerts and meditation, to

illustrate their theory, but it also applies intriguingly to issues of perspectivism and self-identity in *Warhammer Online*. As mentioned previously, Kerr essentially distinguished between the view of a player sitting at his computer hitting keys to play the game and the “virtual perspective” of what the player’s avatar is doing in-game (Kerr 2009, 5). Berger and Del Negro’s structure of focus/fringe/horizon describes this distinction in a number of ways.

Any video game may be considered an interactive performance, where the player interfaces with both computer hardware and game software, and in doing so performs the role of the avatar on the screen. This notion of performance is particularly emphasized in MMORPGs, in which the player performs his or her character not only for themselves against the computer but for an audience of other players. When participating in this kind of performance, players shift their perceptual focus to the monitor; the room in visual view of the seated player becomes the fringe and the edges of peripheral vision form the horizon, which in this case is the rest of the room behind the player that is known to exist but is only partially being experienced. During my fieldwork, the Sons of Myrkwood met every Tuesday night to play together. When attempting to revisit the memories as performance events, I vividly recall the in-game action but my actual-world surroundings and other events (i.e.: people talking to me in the actual world) are only vague wisps. My informants Devin and Scott both attest to this shift in attention, also claiming that they can easily “shift out of the game world.” Within the game world the “virtual perspective” is visually framed by a horizon consisting of the borders of the monitor, while a perceptual horizon of three-dimensional depth in the game world functions like a geographical horizon: as an avatar you can only see so far in the three-dimensional virtual environment. In this perspective, the focus and fringe are fluid as they continually change with the actions required by

the player: like an etic perception of a particular music genre being "noise" rather than talent, playing *Warhammer Online* appears quite chaotic and overwhelming. I suspect that a characteristic of gamers as a group is the learned ability to actively shift attention focus quickly between elements on-screen. Beyond simply being able to focus on moving the avatar, a player has to be aware of spatial relations with other party members and enemies, keep tabs on health and action point bars, watch enemy health bars and actions and time abilities to be most effective. When I am playing my Sorceress in combat, my attention quickly shifts from watching the cooldown timers on my ability bar, to my health, back to my ability bar and during this other non-immediate elements of the GUI are relegated to the fringe. "State of the Realm", a user-created "add-on" that provides tactical information on enemy whereabouts, is one such element within but existing at the periphery of the game world that becomes the fringe as I shift my focus away from it when I enter combat.

Berger and Del Negro tie the focus/fringe/horizon structure to perceptions of self by using it as the basis from which to analyze the experience of the self in music, noting the experiential "loss of self" as a multi-layered-complex (Berger and Del Negro 2004, 61). The "loss of self" is essentially losing awareness of the self (without realizing that) during liminal periods of *communitas* provided by participation in performance events. In analyzing the phenomenological self in virtual worlds, the Turnerian concept of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) implies face-to-face group participation that is not directly reflected in *Warhammer Online*. The concept is reconfigured first by the medium of the internet, then by that of the game world itself, wherein loss of awareness of the actual-world self during intense periods of liminal performance produces a kind of loosely-distributed *communitas*.

In describing their interpretative framework of identity, Berger and Del Negro suggest that the first stage is attaching interpretive meaning to experiential phenomena before re-interpreting the object in terms of identity (Berger and Del Negro 2004, 141). That initial interpretation of meaning is made from the interpreter's cultural context and tradition (142). In *Warhammer Online*, the player as interpreter views the virtual world from both his cultural context in the actual world as well as emically through the cultural context of the game world itself. This positionality suggests that not only cultural but also media contexts determine perception in virtual worlds: Following on McLuhan's "the medium is the message" theory, Postman suggests with the term "media ecology" that new social media create new or at least different ways of truth-telling and relating to other people and in this way shape communication (Postman 1985, 27). The game world as both a cultural and media context affects the perception of players, from the obvious visual developer-coded graphical appearance to deeper implications of virtual text-based and metacommunication (in terms of non-text or voice chat, such as emotes) between avatars.

Where Berger and Del Negro note that self-experience can emerge in many different forms, they are considering perceptions of the self in the actual world (Berger and Del Negro 2004, 62). The term "avatar" was originally borrowed from the Sanskrit word for divine "descent" or "manifestation" and in that way is most notably used to refer to manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu in Hindu scripture. "Avatar" was popularized in the early 1990s by cyberpunk author Neal Stephenson (1992) and the appellation has been largely adopted by both commercial game retailers and scholars. The term holds significance for a discussion of virtual self in that it implies the character the player controls in-game is more than a tool of the game

but rather a manifestation of the player him or herself. Like the baseball bat or hockey stick that have been often popularly observed to function as "extensions" of the player's body, the keyboard and mouse in the hands of a gamer who has shifted his or her focus of attention to his performance in the game world are similarly extensions of the player's reach: extensions that the player is only partially experiencing. Self-experience in gaming does not focus on the actual-world perspective of the hardware interface between human and machine, but on the performance of the avatar in the game: a veritable Other world. The avatar represents not so much an extension of a bodily appendage, but an extension of the cognitive experiential self. Berger and Del Negro's discussion of the problematic use of the definite article "I" and the objectification of unresponsive or injured body parts (Berger and Del Negro 2004: 63) are reflected in *Warhammer Online*. The conception of the self as a "thing" is not problematic here since, as extra-body objects, avatars are both objects distinct from the actual world body and animated by the self.

3.3 Identity as a Fluid, Narrative Construction

Already from a preliminary discussion of self-perception, the potential for fluid and dynamic identity is a very real possibility in virtual worlds. In the actual world, postmodernism in folkloristics and cultural studies has shown us that identity is more a production and dynamic process (Storey 2003, 79) than it is a static state or inherited quality. People and groups can hold multiple identities, each one contextual and contingent. While the hard-coded programming of *Warhammer Online* only allows for a limited number of ways to express identity, the game structure enables players to create and shift between multiple identities with ease.

Right from the character creation screen, identity in *Warhammer Online* is a negotiated process between player and developer. The game offers you a limited series of different "races" to play, and, within those categories, different classes and a restricted number of premade faces. By clicking on the "continue" button at each stage of this process, players express their limited agency in choice but also assume the narrative identity from the *Warhammer* franchise lore that each race and class represents. As symbols, the avatars are not born into the world *tabula rasa* but rather come pre-loaded with appearance and narrative identity detailing how a Dark Elf should be arrogant, how an Orc should be humorously witless and how a Goblin should be cowardly. The appearance of an Orc as a green-skinned monstrous brute with a British accent is as much a commercial production of the *Warhammer* franchise as it is based in popular literary tradition. The Orc is a construction of popular culture, derived largely from the literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien and other fantasy authors. While many literary works reference traditional oral European folklore, they are also products influenced by both genre and individual creativity; the closest analogous creature in traditional European folktale and legend is most likely the Scandinavian troll.

Unlike some virtual worlds where there is no storyline or game mechanic, *Warhammer Online* immediately opens with a narrative unique to your newly-minted avatar's race. This narrative continues through quest chains that you complete to advance your avatar both through the storyline and in terms of gaining power and abilities. By the end-game, when you have reached level 40, your avatar will have transformed from a lowly foot soldier to a revered hero of your faction within the game narrative. Aside from role-players who perform their virtual race, most of my informants chose avatars based more on class abilities than on race. One notable

exception to this is my informant "R," who did not socially role-play his character but was very particular about aesthetic and crafted his avatar's appearance for personal meaning. Devin was very specific about the appearance of his character but he utilized both visual appearance and narrative to create his avatar. Devin named his main character "Isildur," a much sought after name of a king from *The Lord of the Rings*, and spent a considerable amount of in-game currency on equipping specific pieces of gear and colours to make avatar-Isildur look like his fictional counterpart as depicted in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) film. By drawing on an external narrative deeply rooted in popular culture, Devin recreated and manifested his own interpretation of the identity of fictional Isildur. His avatar, then, was not only a representation of film director Peter Jackson's Isildur, author J.R.R. Tolkien's Isildur, or a reflection of Devin's own self but combined all of these elements into a multivocal symbolic identity. This construction was deliberate; I was with Devin when he saw the "Knight of the Blazing Sun" class for human avatars, which is essentially the Warhammer conception of a High Fantasy or Romantic medieval knight, and he immediately attempted to get the Isildur name.¹²

While J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has arguably been significant in popular culture since its publication in the 1950s and widespread rise of fandom in the 1970s, the release of the film trilogy and the subsequent accolades accorded it by the film industry and movie goers has firmly rooted that imagined reality within contemporary popular culture. Defining what is "mainstream" in popular culture is problematic and often defaults to audience/consumer size or corporate media coverage – neither of which are particularly unbiased methods of measurement.

¹² Avatar names are unique in most MMOs, and, as Learning (2009) also alluded to in his thesis section on naming conventions, well-known popular culture names are quickly taken within days of the launch of an MMO. In this case, it is likely that the player who initially had the name deleted his character.

Lord of the Rings fans, as a group, have often existed at the social fringe of popular culture and the name "Isildur" is relatively obscure enough to not only denote the fictional leader but to semiotically connote emic knowledge. Devin's construction of both the appearance and naming of his avatar had the social impact of communicating group boundary-marking knowledge, and was consistently commented upon by other players. Interestingly, the construction of identity did not stop with narrative-based naming conventions; as an example of how identity construction is not a separate or compartmentalized stage but part of a dynamic identity, I noted with interest that Devin began leading warbands. I asked Devin what made him decide to take the reins of the warband, considering he was not only new to leading but new to the MMO itself and he answered, "I don't know. I think it's the name. It feels like I should be leading and people look to me to for what to do."

Devin is not a role-player, but began to feel the pull of the power of the identity he had created for himself. Isildur was a highly sought-after name, which made Devin want to perform his best to "live up to the name." When he said that people were looking to him for direction, he was referring not so much to text-based or verbal communication but metacommunication (although he told me that he was in fact told by one player in a warband that he should be leading): as I observed, players would communicate through movement, following him or hovering around him, or the out-going leader¹³ of the warband would often appoint him as his successor. In this way, Devin began to not only communicate insider status as a *Lord of the Rings* fan through the construction of his avatar, but also to perform the identity he had appropriated/created and create a social identity.

¹³ As PUGs, the players in any given open warband changed frequently, due to any range of issue from dinner in the actual world, to restless actual-world children to boredom or interpersonal conflict.

Like Devin, my informant "R" also went to great lengths in the construction of his avatar. He too spent considerable in-game gold on "perfecting" his character, as he put it; for "R," each avatar represented a quest for perfection. His avatars were deliberate constructions that wove together his own interpretation of "Dark Elves" with non-Warhammer literary conceptions, visually manifested in the *Warhammer Online* game world. The first time I interviewed him he was participating in an in-game guild meeting that had all of the members' avatars standing around a table in a war tent, illuminated by the flickering of torches. His guild, "The Black Guard," is a Dark Elf-only role-play guild that expects each of their members to have a social background narrative. My informant was "a houseless rogue who cares for nothing but killing High Elves and gold." The Warhammer franchise has an expansive amount of lore, and I wondered from what sources "R" had developed his interpretation of a "Dark Elf."

R: The look I draw from Warhammer sources, Dark hair, pale, because they don't get much sunlight: they live underground. That is how they should look. The books I have read, [R.A.] Salvatore, completely opposite: Dark Elves have white hair and dark skin. I didn't like that, so this is the Warhammer look but the backstory, the culture, I learned from non-Warhammer books.

Where Devin had created his avatar as a symbol that referenced a non-Warhammer fictional character, "R" extensively employed a synthesis of Warhammer and non-Warhammer literary sources to craft a unique identity out of his interpretation of Dark Elf "culture." When I asked "R" whether there was social conflict between players' role-playing their own interpretations of Dark Elves from different sources, he said he had never had that problem. "The Black Guard," however, was a highly ordered guild and met so frequently that perhaps each member's conception of Dark Elf identity changed over time to become approximately equivalent to some vague form of archetype. "R" may not have experienced conflict over playing your character's identity "properly" within the structure of the guild, but I witnessed on

more than one occasion similar issues explode into arguments in the larger and temporary structure of the open warband.

3.4 Identity Performance, Social Politics, and Conflict: Playing Your Character “Right”

Firecell: Your role should be healing
Heavencalls: Because you say so?
Indifference: Friggin smite clerics
(text-chat exchange May 15, 2009)

On the morning of May 15, 2009 during my fieldwork, I was with an open warband assaulting enemy keeps when the above argument broke out. It concerned a Warrior Priest, Heavencalls, who got into an argument with Firecell (level 19 Bright Wizard) and Indifference (level 18 Shadow Warrior) about his character design. Heavencalls made a joke about the irony that he is a Warrior Priest who cannot heal, which prompted retorts from some of the warband members and quickly escalated to Heavencalls leaving the warband. The Warrior Priest class depicts a kind of martial monk who can both heal team members and deal divine damage to enemy players. The class represents a middle space on the spectrum between the class “archetypes”¹⁴ of healer and DPS (damage per second: damage output-focused avatars). Since the Warrior Priest can both heal and project damage, a player not focusing on developing only one of the two paths generally creates a balanced character that specializes in neither. In *Warhammer Online* there are more damage-dealing classes than healing, and they tend to be more popular so that any healer archetypes are often socially expected to be specialized as such. Heavencalls was a “smite cleric,” that is, a Warrior Priest who was either balanced or specialized in damage-dealing. Later that same day I witnessed an almost identical situation involving

¹⁴Warhammer Online used the term “archetype” to refer to main purpose of a character class: the sorcerer class, for example, was defined as the “Ranged Damage per Second” (RDPS) archetype. The term is also familiar to folklorists as referencing recurring folktale character patterns.

another "smite cleric" (Adolfred, level 16 Warrior Priest) who had complained about a lack of healing during combat and was subsequently censured by the majority of the warband for "bitching" and because he himself was playing a class designed to be a healer. The example of the "smite cleric" and the social tension it inevitably caused in open warbands speaks to the underlying negotiation between identity as conforming to social expectation and the avatar as an expression of individual creativity and role-playing.

Social expectation of playing your avatar in the "correct" way is largely based on a socio-tactical model of the group that requires members to maximize particular abilities of their avatars as tools for success. The particular abilities (or character "builds"¹⁵) to be maximized sometimes changed and were open for debate, which was usually conducted out of the game on forums and YouTube, but were widely circulated through both those mediums as well as through guilds and intra-warband social censoring. This pole of the spectrum seemed to focus on *Warhammer Online* more as a military game to beat than a social virtual world, with some players on the forum going so far as to work out the mathematical formulae behind the game mechanics (Attic_Lion, Warhammer Online Forums, comment posted March 27, 2010). This method of reducing the world to its literal coded "rules" essentially represented a cult of efficiency that stipulated avatars must be maximized for their "role," as the Bright Wizard Firecell put it. The term "role" as used here is interesting in that, as alluded to earlier in this paper, the "role"-playing in MMORPGs is more akin to sports team "position" playing than *Dungeons & Dragons* "role-playing" (Learning 2009, 3). Your party "role" is initially determined in part by the

¹⁵ The term "build," in reference to a particular set of skills or abilities developed by an avatar, is not specific to *Warhammer Online* but certainly highlights the association with the conception of "construction" in designing and playing an avatar.

developers, who code your class's archetype; the "correct" build and exactly how to perform that role, however, is largely socially-determined.

I once briefly met an Elf who wore no shoes. She was a role-player in the *Dungeons & Dragons* sense, and her background narrative dictated that she did not like footwear. In *Warhammer Online*, footwear is a standard piece of gear that can provide your avatar with better armour and enhanced abilities. In terms of maximum efficiency, this shoeless Elf was deliberately holding herself back from her full potential and it was not long before she was ostracized from the warband we were in and the argument spilled on to the forums. Similarly, player "Tzs" put it well when he commented that:

I roleplay by action, not words. That is, when playing my High Elf, I ask myself "what would my character "do?" and try to do that. I don't give a hoot how my character would talk about it. So, for instance, if the warband decides to let the Elf lands fall while they go take empty BOs and keeps elsewhere, because "they will get more renown recapturing the Elf lands later", screw them--my character is not going to surrender his homelands, even temporarily, just so some filthy humans and filthy dwarves can satisfy their greed a little faster. If I were not on a roleplaying server, I'd probably be going with the warband. :-)" (Tzs, Warhammer Online Forums – Phoenix Throne, comment posted June 09, 2009).*

It was to address situations such as these that the dedicated role-play server Phoenix Throne was designed, yet it is also there that this event occurred. Since identity is partially expressed through performance of avatars, social tension between play styles of maximum efficiency and role-playing are directly tied to tensions surrounding expression of identity.

It is through such social conflict that the nature of virtual identity begins to emerge. While scholars have demonstrated that identity is a dynamic, contingent, situational and relational process in the actual world, virtual identity represents a manifestation of these qualities in something partially tangible – the avatar. The medium of the internet and then of the virtual world itself, as technological and cultural context, alter traditional theory by adding new

dimensions and perspectives from which to not only view but experience identity. As it is problematic to attempt to separate theory from methodology, I have attempted to reveal through ethnographic narrative how identity is constructed, performed and experienced in *Warhammer Online*. Perhaps viewing virtual worlds as particular mediated contexts requires not so much a grand theory of identity, but a contingent and context-based approach. Acknowledging that "identity" as a term or framework can be almost too fluid to grasp and can change with discussion of it perhaps needs a reconfiguring not only of experience but of theory to accurately interpret and describe virtual phenomena.

Chapter 4: Dynamic Death and Transformative Commodities

As touched on earlier, Boellstorff notes the apparent ambiguity of humanity in the idea of the virtual-human: that as beings influenced by both nature and culture, humans have always existed in multiple worlds (Boellstorff 2008, 5). Bittarello describes this notion when she points out that "virtual worlds" have likely existed as long as humans have, and are merely expressed differently through differing media (Bittarello 2008, 5); from Plato's allegory of the cave asking the listener to imagine a different world of metaphor to J.R.R. Tolkien's literary fantasy world of Middle-Earth, virtuality has historically (and likely pre-historically) maintained a significant social role in human society. Both Plato and Tolkien worked from, and were subsequently read and claimed by, a tradition of Western ideology and worldview.

The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro lived amongst the Araweté people in the Amazon and his ethnography describes the role of death and ambiguity in their cosmology (Viveiros de Castro 1992). I highlight his work with the Araweté as an illustration of the existence and interpretation of virtuality in a non-Western cultural context. According to the Araweté, humans are not "really existent in an earthly sense" (1992, 73); people (or at the least the Araweté) cosmologically inhabit a liminal earthly half-life that cannot be fully completed until they become the Other through death and metaphysical cannibalism. The Araweté spiritual lifecycle is a series of transformations of both body and perspective: in his article on Amazonian perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro describes a shamanic transformation involving the altering of Nature instead of Culture, which all beings are said to share in the notion that physical morphology is merely a malleable expression (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Without trivializing

Araweté beliefs, I find their cosmological implications for identity transformation an intriguing non-Western perspective with which to view virtual sociality in *Warhammer Online*.

When communing with gods and the dead, Araweté shamans use tobacco and the *arary* rattle as magical tools to essentially open the door to the Other world (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 219). While alcohol and drug use is not uncommon amongst some *Warhammer Online* players, human-computer hardware interfaces and avatars act both as tools with which to access the virtual world and as different levels of mediation within it. Where some Amazonian shamans employ material objects to actually (instead of symbolically) transform themselves (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 482), the avatar becomes a mask for the player in an abstract sense. Following Berger and Del Negro's account of the constant shifting of focus and phenomenological embodiment in self-perception (Berger and Del Negro 2004), the player-avatar relationship can be complex and, much like conceptions of postmodern identity, situationally contingent (Bauman 1972). What I mean by this is that sometimes my informants regarded their avatars as mere tools and other times they saw and experienced the world "through" them, and occasionally someone would use the pronoun "I" instead of "he" or "it." This suggests that identification with avatars is contextual and constantly in motion. I use "mask" here as one of the many different meanings contained in, and symbolized by, the avatar within this flow of shifting identity. As a "magical" tool and a device of meditation, the avatar is the embodiment through which players access and experience the virtual world and, as such, the avatar also functions as a mask.

Goffman's metaphorical theatrical actors maintained agency with what props they would use and how they would represent themselves on stage (Goffman 1959, 253). I argued in the last chapter for analyzing sociality within *Warhammer Online* as its own cultural context and here I

am not so much interested in the motivations and actual-world choices of the actors (players) themselves, but of the social choices of their chosen representations – the avatars as masks that they design and play (as). The mask in a general sense is an extraordinary symbol of multivocality that can contain many meanings operating at different levels and within different contexts. Grimes argued that in Early Modern Europe some kinds of masks functioned to symbolically appropriate the power or essence of what they were designed to represent (Grimes 1975, 509). It must be remembered that avatars, like the identities they express, are constructed: visually an avatar is composed of “race,” class, skin tone, haircut and colour, name and gear ranging from armour colour to decorative trophies. The avatar Isildur was a complex construction that wove together extra-world elements from rival literary sources and was designed to look the part – or at least Devin’s interpretation of the literary-film adaptation of Tolkien’s Isildur. As a mask, my main avatar Moriguendlyn was both a disguise as well as a representation: I designed the name to reference an obscure J.R.R. Tolkien work in which the “Moriguendi” (meaning “Dark Elf”) were one of the early branches of Elves. The meaning was realized through the physical construction of the avatar, since I created Moriguendlyn within the *Warhammer* race of Dark Elves.¹⁶

“Putting on the mask” of the avatar transports the player into the virtual world, wherein he or she “becomes” the Other. By nature of its virtuality, identity in *Warhammer Online* is ambiguous at best. There are, however, oppositional structures that define and order the world at particular times and within particular spaces. The avatar as mask grants the player access to this system of binaries, but also situates the player within it; Viveiros de Castro described

¹⁶As an aside, on a role-playing server I had initially expected more players to get the naming reference but I only ever met two other people who approached me to say they recognized it. One of the players, however, was very enthusiastic as he had a character with the name I had originally tried to get: “Moriguendi.”

Araweté society and cosmology (which cannot be separated) as "layers of context and levels of contrast" (1992, 64). *Warhammer Online* is a world of binaries that define each avatar's place in society. Some of these are dialectical, such as the factional Order/Destruction opposition and, like the player/developer structure, are also reciprocal relationships. The Player/developer relation is global in scope, defining the "us" group of players in a power relationship with the game developers, and while the borders of this opposition are stronger than most, players retained agency in the relationship through being consumers as well as delivering feedback to the developers. The factional division of Forces of Order/Forces of Destruction immediately (and permanently) set opposing players' avatars as "enemy." A player could create different avatars of the other faction only on different servers: faction was inherent to avatar construction and was impossible to change.

This did not stop players from communicating across enemy lines; Lynda told me one story of her experience in the similar MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, in which enemy players respected a universal unspoken etiquette that allowed for players simply completing quests without violent intent from being molested. This was only a rule, however, and in my experience, especially with large groups, unexpected encounters with enemy players tended to end in death. In one such experience on October 1st 2009, I was part of a large warband taking enemy keeps when we came across a small five-person party of enemy Order. The Order players did not try to engage us, but instead jumped around in circles in a kind of dance. My group briefly hesitated, but then massacred them. This led to a discussion about whether or not we should have left them alone, with one player remarking that, "they just wanted to dance!"



Figure 4.1 Post-massacre warband chat (screenshot by author)

Interestingly, *Warhammer Online* does not actually have an emote for “/dance,” which is a common command in most other MMORPGs that would animate avatars into a brief dance. This has long been a point of contention between players and developers, who seem to suggest that the lore and atmosphere of *Warhammer* is not conducive to dancing. This speaks to Learning’s observation that MMORPGs are inherently divided by paradigmatic game mechanic, either PvP or PvE (Learning 2009, 12). While my informants Devin, Scott, “R,” and Andrew all became players because they knew *Warhammer Online* was PvP-centric in its focus, this paradigm also influences not only how the developers encoded the world to encourage PvP but

influences vernacular socialization into that mindset, or, virtual-worldview. Through these binary oppositions, players as avatars are situated within differing levels of context and contrast, which are external factors that contribute to identity production.

Players can be contextualized, socialized and identified through the avatar as a mask, but embodiment of the avatar is the transformation that makes the person "complete": avatars are designed through the developer/player relationship, with each party asserting creative control and agency, but only becoming "people" within virtual society through animation by the player's performance. "Avatar" etymologically suggests divine manifestation, akin to an empty shell of pixels that is animated by an external force: like the Araweté belief of malleable physical morphology stemming from a mythical time of non-differentiation (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 65), every avatar is different but each one is animated by a player. This transformation, or, more accurately, synthesis, reveals a structure within virtual embodiment of Nature-Culture-Supernatural.

Warhammer Online is clearly both a product of technology and culture; as a cultural product, the game world is inherently coded (both literally and symbolically) with Western notions of folklore, identity and society. Since technology falls within the broad domain of Culture (as opposed to Nature) as a product of human ingenuity, MMO virtual worlds can be construed as a techno-cultural product. As argued above, these products have also developed as their own cultural contexts. These two levels of techno-cultural product and cultural context explain the dual-mediation of the hardware interface and the avatar. As Bausinger has noted, technology can be rapidly "naturalized" into folk society, shifting it along the conceptual spectrum from "technology" towards "natural" (Bausinger 1990, 18). Within a virtual world,

'nature' and physicality refer to the hardcoded elements of the world like graphics and general avatar appearance. When a player's perceptual focus shifts into the world and the avatar is embodied as masked self, the player's performance animates the 'natural' physical body of the avatar and creates a synthesis between player and conduit. This synthesized manifestation melds the virtually-mediated Nature and Culture to create the Supernatural, or, the Other.

While the shamans of some Amazonian groups can transform themselves into supernatural beings or animals, it is through death that the Araweté transform into the Other. According to Viveiros de Castro, death is what structures Araweté society and also the event that puts society into movement (1992, 15). Death for that cultural group is what spiritually transforms the body into a supernatural form: a god, an "enemy," the "Other" – all ambiguously bound together – but nevertheless a continuity of being that enables relations between Heaven and Earth (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 255). Death in *Warhammer Online* does not carry with it the same spiritual quality, but it plays a central role in structuring society. As an example of a PvP-centric MMORPG paradigm, *Warhammer Online* differs from other virtual worlds like *Second Life* where there is no combat; not only is the game hardcoded to encourage player/avatar death but it is a concept internalized by players. As an Orc named Karazbana I once played with in a warband observed, "dying is a big part of this game." While "wiping" (having your group completely killed) often resulted in social conflict over leadership or lack of tactical healing, players recognize that in any combat one side is bound to die. And one side *has* to die in order to create social and tactical movement in the world: as noted earlier, *Warhammer Online* is divided into geographical regions and in each region there are strategic structures that can be captured by players for experience points and rewards (and to deny the same to the enemy faction). There are

no developer-avatars with whips insisting players fight and kill each other,¹⁷ but there is always at least one large-scale battle every day in one of the regions. Remembering that MMORPGs are games with no definitive end, only an “endgame” state of being when you have attained the highest level but continue playing for the social element, the eternal transferring of territory between the factions is what drives the world; in marketing for *Warhammer Online*, the development company, Mythic, uses the phrase “War is everywhere” to describe the world. Individual player/avatar development and societal change both rely upon this never-ending process of war.



Figure 4.2 - Respawn window (screenshot by author)

¹⁷This is technically only partially true, because there are some NPC commanders who berate the player with scripted dialogue in an attempt to motivate them to fight.

Combat is a social performance: during warfare players perform their identity through martial prowess or through socialization during the liminal inter-combat periods, such as waiting for keep doors to close. Warfare is both tactical and social, and the basis for community in *Warhammer Online*. Movement in warfare is driven by killing, death and resurrection: healing classes have the ability to "rez" fallen players in the same area, restoring them to life. When you die, you as the player are separated from your avatar, who is depicted dead on the ground, and you can no longer interact but continue to watch the action unfold around your corpse until you either "respawn" and reunite with your avatar back at a warcamp or are on the receiving end of a resurrection spell from a friendly healer. Along with tanks and casters, healers are a critical component of any tactical group and responsible for keeping the group alive in combat. When a group "wipes," however, the healers are overrun and killed by enemies. Healing is a socio-tactical phenomenon, in determining who gets healed, how much and when, but a temporary one that either supports the goal of eventual destruction of the enemy or fails and signals your own destruction: either way, ending in death. Death temporarily separates the player from the second level of mediation of the avatar, but the player remains partially in the virtual world through the first layer of mediation by interfacing with computer hardware.

Death in Araweté cosmology is a multi-dimensional process beyond simply transforming by crossing the barrier of life/death: the death complex is intertwined with metaphysical cannibalism that underlies how the Araweté conceptualize the world around them (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 254). According to Viveiros de Castro, transformation through cannibalism is a transubstantiation into the supernatural world that is the key to shedding the physical body and "becoming the Other" (1992, 156). Cannibalism is a concept used in *Warhammer* lore,

referencing the races of Orcs and Goblins that are said to feast on the flesh of the allied Humans, Dwarves and Elves. While the franchise lore does not go any deeper than that, I observed players in warbands often role-playing their Orc and Goblins in that fashion – passionately stating that we needed to “crush” the enemy and “eat” them. When I interviewed Devin, he was familiar with this performance and said that it spoke to the nature of imagined warfare in the game world and the “totality” or finality that eating an enemy signified. In a metaphysical or virtual sense, the link between “cannibalism” and consumption in MMORPGs is worth exploring. As subscribers (“consumers”), players consume the game both as commercial product and in a social sense as they play through it as avatars. RPGs are generally constructed around the concept of linear movement: the player-avatar developing and advancing through power as delineated by levels and experience points. In *Warhammer Online*, gaining experience points is mostly done through combat and killing. Deceased enemies, both NPCs and players, offer “drops,” or gold and items that the victorious player-avatar can loot off the body, which then disappears. In this way, players ‘consume’ enemies by killing to loot their bodies. The consumption of enemies through death is what gains the player/avatar experience points, thus how they advance in the world. While personal death is a temporary hindrance for players, the general process of killing-death-looting creates a complex of consumption that fundamentally structures the world.

4.1 Virtual Geographies: War and Memory

The world itself is dynamic, responding to the social processes of the player-consumer. The visual virtual world and everything you can interact with inside of it is a representation; in the ephemeral ‘third-space’ of the internet the white snows, deep green pine trees and arid

bleached deserts of the world of *Warhammer Online* can be rendered in three-dimensional colour and depth, but brought out into the actual world, like words on a page, the "world" appears as millions of lines of programming code. In the virtual Other space, the lines of code are transformed into something almost tangible – to be accessed through the union between player and avatar. The aesthetic design and physics of the world are written by Mythic developers, who also continue to maintain it: providing technical support, creating new content to add to it and fixing technical "bug" issues that threaten the world's stability. The process of consumption that players engage in takes place within the constructed "zones," or geographical regions of the world that Mythic created but are inhabited and imbued with meaning by players. As actual world societies and communities attach meaning to the spaces and places around them, geography has historically been fundamentally associated with conceptions of group.

As Rheingold and others have argued, place does not necessarily have to refer to actual world terrain (Rheingold 2006; Boellstorff 2008; Learning 2009) and, according to Learning, neither is it tied to the visual geographic regions in MMORPGs, but instead to the disembodied chat window (Learning 2009, 106). While I agree that it is the channel of communication that sets the basis for group and community through any mode or medium, the media ecology of the communication can also influence and shape the communication and meaning, thereby also shaping society (Postman 1985). The spaces of the virtual geographies in *Warhammer Online* are not interfaced with in the same way as actual world geography, but that does not mean that they should be neglected as objects of study: the chat window is indeed the tool and virtual-within-virtual space that facilitates communication between players, but the virtual environment also plays an important role in social relations. MMORPGs are not text-based MUDs, and, unlike

their predecessors, cannot be reduced to dialogue between parties that disregards media.

Boellstorff points out the seeming Western emphasis onvisuality as precondition for knowledge and agency, going on to suggest that vision and place are linked through the concept of "landscape" (Boellstorff 2008, 92). Unlike *Second Life* where some of Boellstorff's informants would interface with a virtual sunset in a similar fashion to the actual world, Learning is correct that in game worlds the landscape has a more functional role. The developers attach strategic meaning to particular geographic points on the map, offering rewards and experience points for the capture or defence of structures like fortresses. Sociality is developed out of tactical considerations as realized in the warband socio-tactical group. The virtual geography is essentially another element of the experience for the player/avatar to consume, through both admiration of the aesthetics as well functionally as means to character development.



Figure 4.3 - Approaching an Elven fortress (screenshot by author)

Through content updates from the developers that redesign the landscape and from the impact of continued and intense social activity, geography in the game world is both dynamic and something beyond merely functional. Each "tier" is divided into six 'zones,' two each for each of the 'racial pairings' (which, in the lore, pit Empire against Chaos, Elves against Dark Elves and Dwarves against Greenskins) and levelling your avatar to move between tiers is a time consuming business. Players repeatedly experience and re-experience the same geography on a daily basis: in the strategic dance of warfare, opposing warbands would often chase each other around the globe, flying between zones quickly to elude the other and take the advantage to capture a structure, which could last for hours. Some days I captured the same fortresses in the same region multiple times, but with different warbands of different players and being opposed by differing opponents. When you have been playing for months, you get to know the zones very well: the shortcuts, obstacles, safe places and ambush points. When laying siege to a fortress the chat window acts as the main communicative artery of the warband, but only insofar as it operates in conjunction with player actions in three-dimensional space. Cultural knowledge of the land allows players to perform effectively in social situations, such as knowing where to stand in the Lord's Room in a fortress so that the lord NPC does not regain health or finding the best spot to create a tactical chokepoint.

All of this can change, however, with a single content patch released by the developers; I re-activated my account with Mythic in April 2010 after almost two months of inactivity, only to find that the world was not the same as when I left. Aside from the shock that my own server, Phoenix Throne, had been shut down (literally wiping out the landscapes I as an avatar had traversed), the developers had also completely overhauled the Tier 1 zones. Upon moving my

avatar to one of the few servers left to connect with informants, I immediately felt like I did upon my initial foray into the world. I did not know the shortcuts or social conventions that were bound up with this new found land I had stumbled into. The earlier rendering of the Tier 1 lands I remembered had been remodelled by the developers in response to players: while Mythic listened to players' ideas and issues on the official forums, MMO players also vote with their feet and the declining number of consumers spurred the development company to revamp the introductory zones in a bid to attract new and former players.

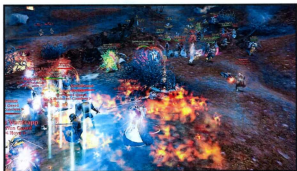


Figure 4.4 - Battle between two opposing warbands (screenshot by author)

Social activity (and lack of it) is a kind of player agency in a sometimes oppositional, sometimes complementary relationship with the developers that keeps the virtual landscape changing, but despite its dynamism, and through its interface with the consumption complex, the

landscape holds memory. For the Araweté, geography is “impregnated with memory, particularly that of peoples’ deaths” (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 51). Though bodies and the carnage of battle disappear from the landscape within minutes of combat in *Warhammer Online*, social activity realized through warfare nevertheless leaves marks of significance on the individual and community levels. Memories of experience – of victories and defeats – build the cultural landscape knowledge that is transmitted “orally” (usually through warband text chat or leadership) and becomes folklore. Virtual landscape may be a means to an end, offering the space in which to consume enemies and points, but also becomes a place through this same agency. Memory is tied to landscape and expressed through stories, usually taking the form of short personal experience narratives. Recounting one such experience from my fieldnotes for 8:00 pm, June 10, 2009:

I logged in as my Dark Elf Sorceress Moriquendlyn and was riding with a warband in the Tier 2 Empire-Chaos zone “Troll Country.” We had just arrived in the nick of time to repulse an enemy assault on the fortress of Mandred’s Hold. We routed the Order forces of Humans, poorly Dwarves and High Elves and defenders became hunters as we pursued them into the murky darkness of the surrounding forest. We had two warbands with about thirty people against their larger numbers of at least forty. I skirmished with enemies players as we fought in confused battles through the dark woods of Troll Country. Then a Goblin named Fixxgit (known affectionately as “Fix”), rallied us together and, despite not being official leader of either warband, outlined a plan to ambush Order when they formed up. We followed him down into Crypt of Weapons, which is one of the Battlefield Objectives that can be captured. The Crypt consisted of a series of dark, poorly lit underground stone hallways that branched off to the left and right, eventually leading to a large open room where the “flag” to capture the site was placed. The “left” branch of the tunnel was a dead-end, making it irrelevant for capturing the BO: knowing this, warbands never bothering going down the left branch of hallways and instead stuck to the right side. Planning on our enemies doing exactly this, Fixxgit had us hide (all thirty, which was feat) around the corner to the left in an alcove and remain perfectly still and silent.

Open warbands, as pick-up groups of essentially strangers, are notorious for not following orders for long, especially if players see an easy kill, so the fact we hid at all was nothing short of remarkable. Order entered the Crypt, descended the stairs in a rush and swept by our position to the right to "cap" the flag. To do this, they had to defeat NPC guards, which is usually not an issue for a large group but as soon as we heard them engage the guards Fixergit gave the word and we poured around the corner and fell upon like a wave of death, trapping them in an enclosed space, completely wiping them.

Although that particular group quickly degenerated into a heated argument between Fixergit and an Elven Sorcerer named Hexlore over proper role-playing and Fixergit's reactionary but out of character use of curse words, this experience highlights the use of cultural knowledge of the landscape in ways not directly intended or anticipated by the developers: the transmission of this knowledge through performative models and the imprinting of landscape with experiential meaning. While there is a potentially infinite range of experiential social possibilities in virtual worlds, the narratives I heard from strangers I fought alongside, over voice chat with my guild or recounted in interview with informants, tended to focus on warfare. This is unsurprising given the PvP nature of the game world, but it also helps reveal how vernacular society (i.e.: that sociality created by players, not developers) moves in tandem with the technical game world through death and death narrative.

4.2 Commodity, Consumption, and Postmodern Tourism

Players are consumers: by the retail purchase of the actual world DVDs containing the client and a serial number, people become subscribers and through the death consumption process in the world become player-avatars. Retail consumption of *Warhammer Online*, initially buying the serial number and then becoming a monthly subscriber, financially enables the

developers to maintain the servers that host the virtual world and add new consumable content to expand it. Like advertising for other computer games, Mythic's marketing ultimately involves attempting to sell physical (or downloadable) copies of *Warhammer Online* to gain more subscribers. Because the genre of MMOs is inherently social, Mythic advertising also includes the essentialization and commodification of online social experience as something purchasable. As players-avatars are a commodity to be consumed by each other on the field of virtual battle, players as subscribers are commodities to the developers. In the marketplace of the MMO industry, Mythic vies for potential subscribers against other similar worlds also offering a commodified online social experience, such as *World of Warcraft* by Blizzard Entertainment and *Aion* by NCSoft. As "game cultures" (Boellstorff 2008), these worlds are commodified and marketed in a fashion similar to cultural tourism sites.

While *Warhammer Online* is a commodity itself, contained within the virtual world is a functioning economy that operates on the trading, killing and looting of in-game commodities, such as enemy NPCs, other players and the consumption of the very geography itself. When taken together, these commodities represent the "natural" environment of the virtual space and while each item continually "re-spawns" (reappears; meaning there are no non-renewable resources) it enables and perpetuates the continual cycle of consumption of nature. Through the commodification of social experience, culture is also consumed by subscribers "buying into" the game culture. In the relationship between developers and players, the former group is responsible for the "fabrication" (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 72) of the interactive components of the environment that become "naturalized" (Bausinger 1990) into a consumable wilderness by the player culture that develops from the "creation" of player-avatars and social relations through

realization and animation of the naturalized-fabricated environment objects. This process of synthesis and hybridization transforms the subscriber into a player-avatar and enables the construction and performance of that identity. As Overton notes, "the [advertising] media invite us to take their representations as adequate reproductions of reality and to transform ourselves in accordance with their images by purchasing their commodities" (1996, 108). This transformative experience is central to the commodification of *Warhammer Online* and the marketing of it not as a reproduction of reality, but a reinterpretation of it that promises to "enlarge their understanding of human possibilities" by transformation through play – since tourism is a form of play (Fife 2004, 164).

Without *Warhammer Online* as a commercial commodity, there would be no community or culture. The "game culture" and social experience that the developers seek to commodify, along with the software coding of the world itself, is a result of the interaction between developers and players, commercial and popular culture. Tourism theory helps describe the issues of cultural commodification and authenticity that dominate virtual worlds, but players are not escapist vacationers or necessarily even "tourists" in a short-term sense but *inhabitants*. Boellstorff observes that no one in the virtual world of *Second Life* is a "native," yet they nevertheless become "residents" as they create meaning and place (2008, 85; 91). Players of course have lives in the actual world: much of the media coverage of virtual worlds tends toward the sensationalist and focuses on extreme cases of people addicted to virtual place (i.e.: the documentary "Second Skin"). All of the people I met and talked to in *Warhammer Online* had no problem balancing time and effort between the actual and virtual. Norm has been playing *World of Warcraft* since it launched in 2004 and described himself as a "hardcore" gamer sometimes

playing twelve hours per day, but only when it worked with his actual world schedule and deployments with the Canadian Forces Maritime Command; Devin and Lynda are both students who play less than Norm, but make regular "visits" to the virtual world. While informants' actual world lives and occupations are largely outside the scope of this research, I felt that the concept of players as inhabitants needed to be situated between "weekend tourists" and addicts that the media sensationalize. Potential players have a chance to try out *Warhammer Online* before committing to being a subscriber through playing a free trial that includes the Tier 1 zones and allows the "tourist" to experience the world until they have reached level 12. For many regular inhabitants of the world, the social transformative play commodified by the developers retains the tourist quality of some other authenticity beyond the actual world but also remains a part of their overall everyday life.

Medina quotes MacCannell (1976)'s modernist interpretation of tourism in saying that it is essentially a quest for authenticity elsewhere (Medina 2003, 354). This is highly significant for virtual worlds scholarship and echoes academic debates over the validity of online community (Foster 1997; Donath 1998; Light 1999; Wellman 1999; Rheingold 2003) that ultimately stem from the virtual's relationship with authenticity. As "almost real" (Boellstorff 2008, 5), virtual worlds might initially be read in a modernist gloss of being platforms of fabricated inauthenticity, designed for tourist marketing, but then perhaps made real, or "created" (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 72) through experience. The debate that Medina outlines between "constructivist" and "essentialist" camps over the authenticity and historicity of Maya identity (2003, 355) provides an intriguing theoretical model that might be refracted or modified to approach virtual authenticity. Following a constructivist perspective, "game culture" in

Warhammer Online is emergent in that it, along with the world, did not exist prior to 2008.

Warhammer Online culture is a recent postmodern construction that commercially combines elements of the tabletop miniatures war game along with player representations of external and individual sources and creativity, as described in the construction of the avatar Isildur in the last chapter. The player culture elements, however, are not entirely constructions without precedent or reactions to consumerism. The vernacular "game culture" of *Warhammer Online* as driven and performed by players draws from a generalized "MMORPG culture" that exists in cyberspace between particular virtual world cultures. Lexicon and tradition are folklore carried between virtual worlds by migrating players and guilds; the culture and society of any given MMORPG is at least partly influenced by its contemporaries as well as some of the worlds that have come before it. When I asked "R" about using ideas he learned in other MMORPGs and applying them to *Warhammer Online*, he answered with how he learned about virtual economics in *World of Warcraft* and brought that knowledge with him:

R: Yeah, that is one hundred percent. You learn stuff man, I never was good with auction houses. I know how to make money now. A little bit of business I learned through the game [World of Warcraft], believe it or not, yeah. I was clueless. Now if I want to I can go in auction house and I can make cash, if I want, if I have time. Stuff like that, it only occurs when you play a little bit. You cannot just come inside into the game and know that stuff.

Each "game culture" that develops in particular worlds is its own cultural context but shares similarities with other MMOs that are transmitted by players in one world and carried to another. Identities that are created in one world can also be translated to others: the Sons of Myrkwod guild initially started in *Dark Age of Camelot* and moved to *Warhammer Online* in 2008, staying until the world began to decline and migrated again to *Aion* in the fall of 2009. The guild name, which is a reference to J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, stayed the same with the same core group of players though the guild cape design changed. The migratory patterns of MMORPG players

reveal flows of knowledge and tradition between worlds that help create particular and different cultures wherever they are carried, suggesting MMO experience is, in general sense, a continuous construction drawing on any number of sources. That said, online social relations can also be historically grounded: like Medina's "essentialist" camp that sees a continuity of tradition through time, sociality in virtual worlds is largely made up of North American and European players and frequently references Western culture.¹⁸ In game studies, as emergent tradition, MMORPGs are grounded in historical contexts of rules and gameplay: *Dungeons & Dragons* as well as the *Warhammer* tabletop war game both predate and influence the MMO version, suggesting the MMOs are not entirely new and closely tied to the actual world. The use of new internet and computer technology to create mediated social places forms a particular media ecology (Postman 1985) that may create new forms of social channels, but while *Warhammer Online* is not a reflection of actual world society players bring with them a traditional competence with the formulaic building blocks of social structure (McDowell 1999). As Boellstorff observed, "actual world sociality cannot explain virtual world sociality" (2008, 63), and perhaps these virtual worlds exist (and flourish) somewhere in between with Fife's argument of a conflation of modernist and postmodernist being the most effective construction of identity (2004, 149).

As a weaving of modern and postmodern ideas with software code, *Warhammer Online* culture may have what Cohen calls "emergent authenticity" (Cohen 1988). As structures and traditions devised for tourism that are imbued with meaning and appropriated by the local culture, the three-dimensional environment, complete with NPCs, fabricated to attract

¹⁸An exception to this is the Korean MMO industry, which produces Korean-made virtual worlds exclusive to East Asian players. See: Jin, Dai Yong and Florence Choe (2008).

subscribers becomes "naturalized" by player culture into a meaningful existential place. This quality of emergent authenticity is realized in the commodified social experience through transformation and synthesis of player-avatars as something both fabricated and created (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 72): both objectively inauthentic and experientially authentic. Writing on experiential authenticity in tourism, Wang proposes it as a third alternative to modernist and postmodernist interpretations as it views any inherent "real" quality of toured objects as irrelevant in the face of the tourist experiencing a Heideggerian "state of Being" (Wang 1999, 359). He follows this line of argument by linking tourism to an "ideal authenticity" found through symbolic transcendence of the normal state of affairs and experienced through the body and self (1999, 360). Existential authenticity is an important concept for viewing virtual worlds that are not quite "real," deliberate constructions and only accessed using specialized technology; the Phoenix Throne community defined the server as a place through their virtual inhabitancy and social interaction and players could have a myriad of experiences there that would not necessarily translate in the same way on the other side of the computer screen.

In line with Berger and Del Negro's discussion of phenomenology that I applied to the virtual self in the last chapter, you experience virtuality through a union between your senses and those of the virtual body of your avatar. Though disavowing MacCannell's conception of a quest for authenticity Wang nevertheless adopts the quest structure for tourist experiences, but redefines the goal as searching for a "true" or authentic self (1999, 360). It is tempting to consider avatars "authentic selves," since "tourist" experiences of authenticity in virtual worlds centre not so much on a different or exotic location as on a different experience of self. The underlying implication, however, is that it presupposes generalized motivation. As I quickly

learned from my informants, everyone plays *Warhammer Online* for different reasons: Lynda is very clear that she is playing a game and doing so for "fun and procrastination"; like Lynda, "R," Devin and Scott agree and view the world as a game first, but each one plays for their own personal interest. With games like *World of Warcraft* boasting almost twelve million subscribers, each one coming from their own social and cultural context and creating their online selves by drawing in countless external sources, I suspect that a typology of overarching player motivations is well beyond the scope of this, and many other, research projects. Motivation, however, is not necessary for describing issues and ideas of authenticity; players inhabit the world, for whatever reasons they choose, and emerging experiential authenticity is one possible theory of descriptive analysis of this phenomenon. Regardless of how and why players get there, *Warhammer Online* is both conceptually a virtual Other place and aesthetically a "fantasy": the experience players have of entering this world is real, as Wang puts it, the fantastic feeling that characterizes existential authenticity (1999, 360).

Chapter 5: Virtual Ostension and the Folklore of Cheating

The construction and performance of avatars, combined with the transformative synthesis of player and virtual object, creates unique identity in a process that the development company seeks to commodify. Once marketing succeeds and subscription is opened, the new player is let loose inside the virtual world of *Warhammer Online*. The game system urges the player to follow the storyline and battle players of the opposing force: to follow the rules. With the hundreds of thousands of players who inhabited the world at the same time I did, there were an even greater number of unique identities (allowing for players creating multiple avatars). Each of these player-avatars had their own personality, opinions and approach to the game; with everyone there for their own reasons, the game system functioned to structure sociality and experience. Most of my informants referred to the world as "the game" and while they did become subscribers to play it, each one also described the richness of online social relations that existed beyond the game rules. Not everyone wanted to play by the rules; like any game or actual world life, there were always those people who cheated.

The client-server technical structure of *Warhammer Online* hindered most conventional cheating attempts, which had the effect of adding to the significance of any successful attempts as well as provoking innovation. Word of glitches, cheats, or exploits spreads fast in the virtual world, and the particulars of where to find them and how to use them become rumour. Capitalizing on successful cheating strategies and the power relations between developers and players, there exist entire shady and potentially illegal companies whose sole product is automated and institutionalized cheating. Specific to the genre of MMORPGs, these "gold farming" companies were conflated with rumours and fears of hackers, leading to a

contemporary legend amongst players that often resulted in ostensive action that defined identity and community. Ostension, according to Dégh and Vazsonyi's seminal article on the subject, is the presentation of a legend narrative through real action (Dégh and Vazsonyi 1983, 6). People hear and internalize narratives through different media and then translate that story into the real world by re-casting it through action – "living out the legend" (Lindahl 2005, 164). In the cultural context of *Warhammer Online*, ostension was one of the ways in which players performed their constructed identities, maintained boundaries between insider-outsider and negotiated the power relations contained within the developer-player structure.

Once upon a time, on a fair May morning in a land far away where knights battle trolls and elves inhabit dark forests, I rode into a small Dark Elf warcamp, bordered on one side by forbidding snow-capped mountains and on the other by dangerous rocky wastes that hid the enemy encampment and certain death. Fatigued and battle-weary from the arduous daily task of slaying my enemies, I stopped in front of the mailbox. I had mail! My initial excitement faded to consternation when I discovered the subject was entitled "HugeCheapSale!!!" Huge-cheap indeed: inside the letter were listed prices for trading in-game gold: for real money. This was my very first spam from what I would later understand to be the marketing division of a gold-farming operation. Coming from a background of single-player and limited-multiplayer video games, I had only heard of the MMO-specific socio-economic phenomenon of "gold farming" on fansites and forums. What does "gold farming" mean? Each MMORPG has an in-game economy, market system and currency, virtual *gold* coins in *Warhammer Online*'s case, which can be accumulated by players through achieving objectives and used to buy and trade items for their characters. The word "gold" was italicized in the last sentence to highlight where "gold

farming” enters into the MMO complex. A more detailed look at gold farming operations will follow in a later section, but for a basic definition gold farming is a complex, third-party system wherein a company employs workers to play MMOs and accumulate virtual currency and high-level characters to be sold online to players, exchanging digital goods and services for real-world money in a transaction that game development companies vehemently oppose.

It was not long after this encounter with gold farmers in the mailbox that I happened to be part of a warband of players wandering around Human lands, attempting to besiege enemy keeps, when I recorded in my field notes a discussion taking place concerning the spam.¹⁹ Everyone viewed the spam humorously and with mild contempt, delighting in pointing out the English spelling mistakes (and suggesting that it was from a Chinese or Korean company²⁰). One player said that if you replied to the mail and actually bought gold from the company that they would subsequently “hack your account” and essentially ransack it, taking all of your virtual items and currency. Two other players agreed with him and no one disagreed in the group of twenty people. This situation occurred several times more over the course of my participant observation and I documented this belief in interviews with informants, general text chat within the virtual world, fan site articles and comments and videos and comments posted to YouTube. Belief in this account-hacking is transmitted as a rumour or personal experience narrative across all of the social media on the internet, and is supported by the companies who create these MMOs. When my guild moved from *Warhammer Online* to a recently-launched MMO called *Aion* in the fall of 2009, I followed and discovered the first time I logged in as my new avatar a

¹⁹ May 21, 2009 in fact; the \$7.99 *HugeCheapSale* mailbox spam had begun only weeks before.

²⁰ While unfortunately racist, this event also acknowledged the power and size of the Korean MMO industry and the proliferation of gold-farming companies that were, up until recently, operated out of China (in 2008 the Chinese government made gold-farming an actual world criminal offense).

message from the developers, NCSoft, warning players not to buy gold online in order to avoid having their account hacked. Most interesting is the player reaction to this belief. Gold farming is generally regarded negatively by the majority of the gaming communities, and players will engage in ostensive action to protect themselves and their community by killing gold farmers.



Figure 5.1 - Ominous greeting message in Aion (screenshot by Author)

5.1 Gold Farming and YOU

Gold farming, also referred to as “RMT” (Real Money Trading²¹) is a socio-economic phenomenon specific to MMOs that facilitates the exchange of real world money for virtual

²¹ I use the term “gold farming” because that is what my informants know the phenomenon as: the term “RMT” was unknown to most players I talked to and is largely a product of scholarly classification.

currency or items. Its history lies in the late 1990s with the launch of an early MMO called *Lineage*. Since then the global market for RMT has been estimated at USD \$500 million in 2008 (Heeks 2008, 9). The majority of gold farming companies operate out of China and vary in size and structure. These companies consist largely of migrant workers or university students that often live on the premises and are paid to play MMOs as a full-time job with the goals of either amassing virtual currency to be sold online to Western players or "power-leveling" players' avatars, which means playing and advancing a customer's character for them (Heeks 2008, 14).

So why the reference to agriculture? Since MMORPGs are persistent worlds, they do not sleep even if players do. Remembering that the geography of *Warhammer Online* consists of different regional zones representing different physical provinces, players interact with the narrative of the game through completing quests that often involve killing NPCs or enemy players within these regions. Whether intentionally coded or by programming coincidence some NPCs have better "drops," that is, when you kill them they provide more or better quality loot than other NPCs in different regions. Staying in a single region killing the same NPCs all day to gain experience points or amass loot is known as "farming." Individual players can and do engage in this monotonous activity, but the term has also become associated with companies who automate this process for you either by leveling your character through this activity or skipping it altogether and offering a direct sale of in-game currency. Socially, using the services of a gold farming company is akin to cheating, and game developers frequently ban the accounts of suspected farmers because it violates the ToS (Terms of Service) or EULA (End-User Licensing Agreement) that players accede to in order to play.

Little is known of the inner workings of these companies because their business is quasi-legal at best. Several documentaries, including a BBC report, have attempted to examine these companies and Dibbell's *Play Money* includes some physical journalistic research in China (Dibbell 2006). In a review of the literature, virtual world scholarship has largely been dominated by sociologists and the fledgling games studies field while gold farming as a niche within that has attracted mostly economics-based studies. Heeks has written one of the most recent and comprehensive studies of gold farming operations to date and constructed a bibliography for further research (Heeks 2008). I encountered gold farming through participant observation and interviews on Phoenix Throne in *Warhammer Online*, first as a member of the guild "The Black Hand" and later the "Sons of Myrkwood" between April 2009 to May 2010 and then in the *Aion* beginning in November of 2009 with the same guild. I also spent time reading and watching YouTube and forums, such as "Warhammeralliance.com" and "Boingboing.net," since these social media in many ways function as an extension of the game world. Many MMO players do not devote themselves to a single world, but rather migrate between them, and so one of my first face-to-face interviews in St. John's, Newfoundland was with Lynda D., a veteran *World of Warcraft* player currently playing a level 40 Night Elf Hunter avatar. When I first interviewed her in March 2009, she had stories of guild members who had negative experiences with gold farming companies. I contacted her in October for a follow-up interview to record her guild mate's story and less than two weeks later she had a personal experience with the gold farming-hacking narrative. She logged in one morning to find her virtual world turned upside down:

"So I woke up and thought, oh maybe I will just go on and check my mail. And everything was gone. My character- first of all my password wouldn't work. I thought there was glitch, because they were fixing the game, so maybe there was a glitch of something, so I actually had to reset

my password. Then, when I signed in, my character was naked...standing in front of the guild bank...So I was like, what? What's going on? ...When I started to go into my other characters they were all naked, they were all standing in front of the guild bank in different cities, and what had happened was that I had been hacked. My account had been hacked into, and I had been robbed. In essence, I had been robbed."

Lynda's account had been cleaned out: all of her virtual items stolen and sold. This is a traumatizing event for a long-time player who has invested hundreds of hours and dollars into the game. Lynda contacted Blizzard, the game developers, who they were able to track and confirm that someone (or something) had logged into her account from a different IP address and made off with her digital loot. Over the next weeks, Lynda was able to claim and recover some of her items and virtual currency, but for her the hardest part of the experience was explaining it to her guild mates. Upon hearing what had happened to her, the first question they asked was whether she had bought gold. I asked her if she believed a gold farming company was responsible: "absolutely." Lynda had not, in fact, bought gold, but had been deceived by a phishing scam that she stated was commonly understood to be operated by gold farmers. Like my own experience with spam in my virtual mailbox, the night before she was hacked, Lynda read a mail message that read, "your character has been chosen to be entered in a draw for special mount" that linked to a "professional-looking" webpage that appeared to be an official Blizzard company page and asked for her account number and password. After submitting her information, she got the message "thanks, you have been entered and we will get to you in a certain amount of time."

Like Ellis asserts in "Death by Folklore," to understand the significance of the event of my informant being hacked it is necessary to explore the context of the rumours and belief that it was set against (Ellis 1989, 203). Gold farming operations are a material truth that has been empirically documented (Heeks 2008). The connection between these companies and hacking

players' accounts is a cultural truth held by players and supported by the game development companies. The groups orchestrating the phishing and hacking scams afflicting MMO communities may or may not be deliberately following a legend tradition of gold farmers being hackers. These types of scams exist all over the internet. In terms of tricking users into divulging personal account information, there is little empirical difference between the "Awards" phishing scam in *World of Warcraft* that Lynda experienced and any eBay, PayPal or similar scam designed to deceive users into providing the group with credit card numbers. Symbolically, however, the phishing and hacking scams adapted for MMOs affect the entire gaming folk group on the community level, not the individual; non-MMO hacker attacks certainly do happen and likely do draw on their own related legend tradition, but when a user provides their information to a website they are sending their private content into the public wilderness of the internet. Game worlds are enclosed community spaces with boundaries protecting them from such wilderness. You are not browsing the internet when playing an MMO and not vulnerable to viruses or Trojans. When you launch the game client, you connect directly to the game company's private and secure server. This is a service you pay for. MMO phishing scams and hacking attacks symbolically mask themselves, perhaps unwittingly, within gold farming rumour tradition since they, like gold farming companies exist outside of the game world as an external, uncontrollable and unpredictable threat to the community.

5.2 Gold Farming as Cheating

Buying gold is the virtual equivalent of secretly fixing the lottery in real life. In this case, the legend is not the existence of gold farming itself but rather the reaction to utilizing it. An

anonymous poster on the Boingboing blog commented on an item dealing with gold farming saying:

*"It's damaging to the integrity of the game. Supposing we played Monopoly, and I offered someone \$20 *real money* for a property; regardless of the wisdom of this offer (and that depends what, if anything, is riding on the game), if it can be seriously made and seriously contemplated, the "reality bubble" of the game is popped. It would no longer be Monopoly as such." (Anonymous, Boingboing Blog, comment posted August 08 2008).*

For the poster, using real money to buy property for the purposes of the game in the board game Monopoly would break the magic circle (Grundy 2008, 238). The game would no longer be a game. And it would no longer be fun. The real world elements that intrude into the ritual space of the game are viewed by this individual as a serious external threat.

In addition to directly buying virtual gold for US dollars, a second service provided by gold farming companies is "power leveling," which is where the player hands over account names and passwords, literally complete control, to the company in order for them to log into the player's account and "level" his or her character. Why would a player hand over control of his or her account to a complete and anonymous stranger? Leveling virtual characters in *Warhammer Online* is a very time-consuming process, and currently the "endgame" (or, the context in which a player has leveled his or her character to the level cap) yields far more social and in-game benefits than the journey. This may function to potentially destabilize the community. By the time someone attains Rank 40 (the highest level currently in *Warhammer Online*) it is expected that they are no longer a beginner, but rather a seasoned veteran player. Power-leveling allows a player to essentially jump from beginner regions to advanced ones, in which they are surrounded by veteran players. The player whose character was power-leveled may still be a "n00b" (or, derogatorily considered a new player) in terms of real experience and skill, which poses the problem of social-tactical cooperation.

For Lynda, gold farming companies are "ruining the gameplay for people, and very often in a real world context" and so using their services went beyond mere cheating at the game. When her account was broken into, her email address was also affected. The group who hacked her account could potentially steal real world personal identification and financial information. Buying gold or power-leveling, then, is directly supporting this virtual thievery.

5.3 Anxiety and Power on the Internet: Farmers and Hackers

Right-click on a webpage using a computer with Windows, and select "view page source." This will open a window containing thousands of lines of arcane code, the programming language HTML (hypertext markup language), which is the very essence of how that website is constructed. The internet itself is home to a multitude of such languages or codes, creating what we see before our eyes when we web surf and animating the virtual worlds that we wander into. By changing a few lines of code a person can dramatically alter the appearance or function of a piece of software, be it a website or a video game. For many "users" the internet and most software applications exist at the level of the GUI (graphical user interface), which is the point-and-click graphical buttons and text that is displayed on your screen. But, like the engine under the hood of a car, the programming code underlying the GUI can be read and (re)written by internet programmers – a type of engineer or mechanic. These people are not "users" of the software, but creators and editors. In terms of internet power relations, programmers can wield a great deal of creative power, either employed by larger corporations or coding on their own. The flipside of understanding the inner workings of the internet and coding is that the same knowledge from which programmers draw creative power can also be utilized for destructive purposes.

The term "hacker" originally referred to a small group of computer science researchers at MIT in the late 1960s, where hacking was related to programming skill and innovation (Mason 2007, 8). In the decades since its meaning has popularly shifted to a negative connotation, broadly referring to cyber-criminals, internet thieves and online terrorists. The definition of "hacker" is hotly contested online, with free software movements and the "Hacker Code" ethical guidelines at one extreme and anarchic rogue criminals writing viruses and thwarting computer security at the other (Mason 2007, 20). The corporate media and public perception of rogue individuals wielding virtual power with destructive intent is, and, I suspect, will continue to become increasingly unsettling to the average user (as in, users of software lacking programming knowledge and skills, if I can make such a generalization) as our society increasingly relies upon computer technology. Most computer users will have some story of at least one experience of a virus, worm, Trojan or other malware that the computer security companies tell us was the result of a hacker's destructive programming ability. For the purposes of this study, whether the malware was actually created by a hacker is of less interest than whether the public and news media believe it was. The spectre of the hacker, real or imagined, haunts the dark virtual alleys and seedy underbelly of the internet. The majority of popularly perceived dangers on the internet, (such as viruses, identity theft, *et cetera*) tend to be traced back to hackers. Whether it is a malicious phishing scam or a data mining application unobtrusively downloaded on to your hard drive that records the keys you press, hackers are the bogeymen of the internet: a prominent source of user problems. The image of the hacker is not improved by the anonymity of the internet, whereby hackers can prove elusive and may be recording your information or manipulating you and your hardware while sitting right across the digital divide typing to you.

A structural binary opposition between nature and culture is useful in conceptualizing the landscape of cyberspace. When a hacker releases a virus he or she has created, it is commonly referred to as being released "into the wild." Although a product of high technology, which should establish it as a bastion of Culture, the internet is perhaps better conceptualized as wilderness, as a kind of techno-Nature. Hackers are the dangerous wolves lurking in the dark wild forests of the net. On the internet the hacker is a shadowy person of great virtual might. He is the "Evil Other" (Ellis 2005, 132). Similar to terrorists in current North American consciousness, hackers disrupt social norms and endanger people (in this case, their private information and virtual assets).

Unless you can read the source code of the page you are entering your personal account or financial information into, possess the knowledge to identify phishing scams or know the person on the other end of the internet that you are dealing with, then you are trusting that the website and the company who operates it are being honest with you and will continue to be so. This adds a binary opposition of public versus private space within the spheres of nature and culture alluded to above. The internet is an exceedingly public space, yet online transactions depend upon the user providing some of their private information. This is anxiety of the private being sent out into the public, exacerbated by the anonymity and indefinite size of the internet – the internet "public" includes millions of users worldwide. This may apply to any online situation where a person is providing information over the internet in some form of transaction, but it is a key component in gold farming and, I believe, important to the MMO-player belief of being hacked by a gold farming company.

Warhammer Online is an enclave within this virtual wilderness; as a commercially-developed retail game, it is a virtual world existing in the void of the internet that has been intentionally shaped and protected from external (f)actors. A monthly subscription differentiates it from the various free virtual worlds it co-exists with and regular monitoring by the development company ensures player/customer issues are dealt with and players protected from unscrupulous types. The "Banhammer" is Mythic Entertainment's monthly report of how many subscriber accounts have been terminated due to infringement of the ToS (Terms of Service), which is usually for selling in-game currency. As an enclave, *Warhammer Online* is home to a community of players. These players are, for the most part, all there to play the game and even at a basic level as an internet group, community in *Warhammer Online* functions to de-Other the otherwise anonymous strangers that surround you.

Gold farming is interesting in that, as a business, it exists both within and outside of MMOs. Marketing agents and the farmers themselves take out subscriptions, costing the gold farming company a temporary expense, and utilize their avatars to spam in-game mail boxes and general text-chat. These agents have their subscriptions and accounts terminated whenever they are discovered by Mythic, but their operating base exists outside the game and outside of the game developer's legal reach. Gold farming represents a breach in the security walls of the virtual world, an alien Other from the wilds of the internet that has entered the world not to play but to conduct illegal negotiations.

5.4 Media Ecology in Contextually-Collapsed Imagined Communities

In her treatment of Halloween-related ostensive acts, Degh cites newspapers as one of the major means of communication of rumours (Dégh and Vazsonyi 1983, 12). While clearly not the

sole means of communication, the usage of corporate media suggests that the legend is widely disseminated on a potentially national scale. This is interesting in that newspapers were also the favoured means that tied Anderson's imagined community together (Anderson 2006, 35). Virtual worlds function similarly to imagined communities, albeit not necessarily politically-inclined, in that while the game itself is directly interactive the conception of community and size of the player base is largely imagined. As citizens of a state pay taxes to a central government and read the newspaper, they simultaneously imagine the shared conception of the nation since they can only feasibly directly interact with a limited number of their fellow citizens; virtual worlds like World of Warcraft are similar in that where that particular MMO boasts 11.5 million players, any given player realistically directly interacts with only a fraction of that number (Blizzard Entertainment, Press Releases). Such game worlds, however, at the same time offer the possibility of interacting with many more people, and it is with the shared knowledge of this possibility that players imagine their gaming community. These imagined gaming communities lack a centralized media source: while all players interact with the game client and the development company's servers, cultural knowledge and the state of the game are shared not through the company's official avenues but through decentralized user-created and operated channels of communication that enable a shared reflexivity not seen before in the "real world."

On the internet content is not tied to medium: with ease a user can separate text from context and reformat that content in a myriad of different ways. User-driven social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Flickr, along with video-sharing sites such as YouTube and content-sharing networks like Bittorrent, enable users to create and upload their own content or remix someone else's. This enables online communities to maintain a strong self-

reflexivity as shared content is continually being interpreted and transformed by a diverse group of people from any number of contexts. This results in what Wesch terms "context collapse" in his work on YouTube, which he suggests incorporates so many different users and their own contexts that an unlimited number contexts collapse onto each other since any given YouTube audience is comprised of billions of people in time and space (Wesch 2008). Players in MMOs interact within the context of the medium of the game, but simultaneously use all of the aforementioned sharing internet technologies to express themselves to each other and shape their imagined community.

Following on McLuhan's "the medium is the message" theory (McLuhan 1964), Postman suggests with the term media ecology that new social media create new or at least different ways of truth-telling and relating to other people and in this way shape communication (Postman 1985, 27). It follows that conventional theories relying on communication and postulated in the real world do not necessarily function in the same fashion in different techno-social mediascapes, particularly within and around virtual worlds. The MMORPG game world is at the epicentre of social media that network the imagined gaming community together, and so is central to the modes of transmission by which the gold farming-hacking legend is spread. In the real world, rumours and legends are disseminated by various forms of media, such as orality, newspapers and television, which people then translate and present as real (ostensive) action. Ostension is shaped by the communication of the legend narrative that it tries to present. If communication is shaped by its media context, then it might be theoretically argued that media also shapes ostensive action in virtual worlds. The fluidity and interconnectivity of text and context within any online medium allows the legend and resulting ostensive action to take place within the same

medium of the internet. The MMO is the medium for both communication and ostension; the gold farming legend is transmitted across every possible media, but each one refers back to the experience in the game world, in which the hacking rumour and experience take place alongside the ostensive community reaction of killing gold farmers. As an avatar, you exist within the same medium as the gold farming-hacking narrative and can interact with/act against it essentially inside the text.

5.5 Virtual Ostension

As Lindahl points out, much work on ostension has focused on negative acts and not the other roles a person might present (Lindahl 2005, 165). In MMORPGs, players are already playing a role and interacting with the game narrative. Since both belief legend and ostensive action exist within the same medium of the game space, players entering the gold farming story blend it with their personal and the overall game narratives: there are two factions in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, Alliance ("Good") and Horde ("Evil"), and as one commenter posted to the uploader on a YouTube video depicting the killing of a gold farmer, "I like you, you play with your prey before you kill them.....YOU ARE A TRUE HORDE!!!!" (Maderlore, Nayson 2007, comment posted 2008). The commenter is alluding to the fashion in which the poster killed the gold farmer, and how it was in keeping with the role-playing attributes ascribed to the evil Horde faction in the game narrative.

What Lynda experienced was "pure ostension" in that the rumour became true for her: gold farmers hacked her account. The community reaction to this narrative tradition ranges from reporting engaging in quasi-ostension to identify gold farmers and, when spotted, performing ostensive acts by killing their avatars whenever possible in defence of the community to

symbolically and literally reclaim the fields of potential gold the farmers were exhausting and maintain the integrity and security of the enclosed realm of the game world. The community, however, has cracks as individuals within it engage in pseudo-ostension and use the rumour tradition to mask their own depredations, casting blame on gold farmers.

By killing avatars that they perceive to be gold farmers, players place themselves within the narrative of gold farming in *Warhammer Online*, and, beyond that, within the meta-narrative of gold farming-hacking in MMOs in general. Players employ a process of what Ellis termed "quasi-ostension" (1989, 208) to interpret other avatars' actions using the narrative tradition of gold farming: the tradition suggests that avatars seen "farming" (killing the same NPC enemies in the same area for an extended period of time and refusing communication) are gold farmers or their automated bots. Due to the integrated nature of internet technology and the ease with which content can transcend medium, many players post screenshots and videos to extra-game fan sites, forums and services like YouTube. Videos are posted for the community to see and many of the comments are congratulatory. This may be similar to the festive or celebratory atmosphere that Ellis associates with rituals intended to rid the community of the threat of the rumour (1989, 215). Killing gold farmers, like the execution Ellis mentions, is a direct way in which to protect the community.

You are running through a forest on a quest, making sure to keep out of the range of dangerous animals, when you come across another avatar with the name "dddgggfff" who is moving in a suspiciously robotic fashion and waiting for the animals he is killing to respawn instead of moving off to another area. He ignores your /wave emote. According to popular wisdom, you have likely encountered a gold farmer or at least an avatar animated by a script of

code that automates its actions. A vigilante might act ostensibly and kill the gold farmer, but there are no witnesses. Unlike real-world rumours and urban legends, there is no media outlet to report the encounter to and filing a report with the "authorities" of the game company is never publicized and rarely responded to. MMO communities exist not only at a socio-cultural intersection between popular and folk culture but also a technological one. The core of a gaming community exists as relationships between players within specific worlds, but its fringes extend beyond to encompass the social media of the internet. So you record a video. A quick hit of the F9 key enables Fraps²² recording, and your next actions are saved as a video file to your hard drive that you may edit and upload later.

Outside of scholarly papers, it is difficult to find a public forum where gamers speak positively about gold farming. Grundy explores social stigma attributed to users of gold farming company's services and determines that such players are more likely to publicly condemn gold farming but privately express personal interest (Grundy 2008, 236). The first two letters in MMO refer to "massively" and "multiplayer," which suggest the extent to which this genre of game is inherently social. As I noted at least twice during participant observation on official *Warhammer Online* forums, social stigmatization due to allegations of cheating quickly led to ostracism in these heavily group-oriented games. Not every gamer would necessarily agree with comments like poster Franko's declaration on a Boingboing.net article that "gold farmers are scum, they deserve every hindrance possible," but a quick search on YouTube reveals a few thousand videos of players in every MMO killing gold farmers (Franko, Boingboing Blog, comment posted August 8, 2008). The "Tarren Mill sever gold farmers" video was posted August 31, 2006 and

²² Fraps is one of the most popular video-recording software applications. It has a simple interface with resolution options and can record sound. Running the newly-created video through a post-production editing suite like Windows Movie Maker or Adobe Premiere allows for touches like transitions and the addition of audio tracks.

has since been viewed 17,477 times (Nayson 2006). This particular video has 56 comments, the majority of which are either general discussion of the game or congratulatory: only six questioned whether the identification was accurate or condemned the poster for immorality. Within the context of this negative player perception of gold farmers, killing them gains you reputation, a highly-prized commodity in MMOs. Killing a gold farmer is an action that essentially distances the player from social stigma as far as possible. When coupled with the rumour of gold farmers being responsible for hacking players' accounts, this killing can be seen as an ostensive action that serves a dual purpose of not only protecting oneself and one's community from this external threat but at the same time gaining social capital.

User Chops066 asked, "how do you know they are gold farmers?" to which he received an answer from Originallos, "you just know, after you get some xp with em, most gold farmers are hunters or locks if you ask them something theyll never respond and you only see em killing mobs that drop stuff like mote's etc" (Chops066; Originallos, Nayson 2006, comments posted 2007). Questions such as the one raised by Chops066 are common on these gold-farmer killing videos and create an atmosphere of controversy, but ultimately are potentially condemning the poster for ruining the day of a regular player and not a gold farmer. Implicit in the question is that it is acceptable to kill gold farmers if that is indeed what they are.

From my own experience in the MMORPGs *Warhammer Online* and *Aion*, and from uploaded YouTube videos, when you engage a gold farmer you are usually alone. Ostensive acts in the actual world, such as placing razor blades into Halloween candy or gingerly checking the coin return slot on payphones for fear of contaminated needles, are often events experienced by individuals. The rumour may be disseminated through mass media, but ostension seems to occur

The presence of gold farmers in these large PvE areas is known to a large number of people, yet ostensive actions against these farmers usually only take place in player-versus-player areas and in each recorded video the player is always alone. I say "usually" because there is the occasional vindictively creative player who finds ways of acting against gold farmers in PvE: on the comments for the YouTube video "Chinese Gold Farmers Must Die" commenter gashuffer51 said, "if i see one of these guys and cant kill them i follow em around and hit all his guys before he does" and indicates that he ruins a farmer's day by stalking them and stealing their targets (Gashuffer51, ChadRoebuck 2006, comment posted 2007).

When I was interviewing Lynda about her experiences of having her account broken into and items stolen, she mentioned a former player in her guild who had reported a similar experience. This man had claimed that his account was hacked by a gold farming company, which resulted in the loss of some communal guild items. He was ultimately kicked from the guild when it was revealed that his own personal items had not actually been stolen after all and he had been lying in order to steal his guild members' items. Engaging in pseudo-ostension to cloak his thievery, this player had used the narrative tradition of gold farmers hacking into players' accounts to create the appearance of the rumour.

When a player gets their account broken into like Lynda did, it engages their self-identity as a member of the folk community; not only do they become part of the narrative tradition but they also identify with the role of the victim or target within the narrative (Fine 1991, 180). The tradition holds that gold farming companies willing to hack players' accounts are not targeting individuals on the internet, such as in conventional non-MMO phishing scams, but instead are aiming at the specific folk group of MMO gamers, and sub-groups related to each specific game

world within that. In light of this, the negative action of having one's account hacked acts to reify the victimized player's identity as a member of the community. This has the function of maintaining group cohesion, at both guild as well as world levels.

Legends and rumours in the virtual world stem from their real world counterparts, but they function and are reacted to in slightly different ways. Virtual ostension is dominated by the medium of communication. In MMORPGs a rumour like the gold farming-hacking narrative is experienced on multiple levels by the gaming community. Understanding and reactions to it are mediated by the existing game narrative and player roles as well as social issues of stigma and social capital. Ostensive action in virtual space, such as killing gold farmers, functionally reclaims lost game space while symbolically defending the community from the external threat of the Other. Action against the narrative within such a reflexive media context results in players not only literally striking blows against the narrative but in ostensive action within the text itself. Acts of virtual ostension are individually documented and socially disseminated by reflexive and form-flexible social media that are shared by and blur the line between infinite audience and actor.

Conclusion: The Death of *Warhammer Online*

Aion is an MMORPG set in a fantasy world where players create avatars from good or evil factions of what are essentially angels that have survived a world-breaking cataclysm. When *Aion* was released it was a major topic of discussion on the Phoenix Throne server. As particular as virtual worlds are, *Warhammer Online* does not exist within a vacuum; almost like the gravitational pull of a celestial body, players inhabit certain worlds until a newly-created one arrives and draws players to it. Like the highly-publicised launch of *Warhammer Online* which drew many players from *World of Warcraft* (and the Sons of Myrkwood from *Dark Age of Camelot*), the release of *Aion* drew players from *Warhammer Online*. The first year following the launch of a new MMORPG seems to be the "make-it-or-break-it" trial that determines the future sustainability of the world. *Warhammer Online* launched with 800,000 hopeful subscribers, but over the course of the year that number dwindled to 300,000 by late 2009 and may be approximately 100,000 by spring 2010.

The decline of *Warhammer Online* had a multitude of causes, including the release of *Aion*. Some of the 800,000 players, including my guild, migrated to *Aion* while others returned to *World of Warcraft* or sought out other MMOs, such as the sci-fi space-based *Eve Online*. When asked what they thought happened to *Warhammer Online*, some of my informants alleged that it had promising ideas that were ultimately implemented poorly and that Mythic Entertainment had been too slow responding to player feedback and adding new content in that crucial post-launch period. In late 2009 Mythic Entertainment began to shutdown servers, finally shutting down Phoenix Throne. Players were offered avatar transfers to the remaining servers, which the development company then overhauled with graphics updates, significant gameplay

improvements and the designation of Tier 1 as an “endless” free-to-play trial in a bid to secure their remaining player base and attract former players.

Players from the now defunct Phoenix Throne were offered choices of where to transfer their avatars amongst the remaining servers. With the shutdown of Phoenix Throne, role-players no longer had a designated server to call home and were forced to play alongside non-role-players. I moved my avatars to a new server in search of a new guild while I began to split my time between *Warhammer Online* and playing with the Sons of Myrkwood in *Aion*. I eventually unsubscribed from *Warhammer Online* with the conclusion of my fieldwork, though my avatars currently still exist in an inactive state in Mythic Entertainment’s database.

Was my fieldwork actually concluded? I defined “the field” as the cultural context (and, by implication, the technological context) of the “place” of Phoenix Throne specifically, and *Warhammer Online* more generally. Heading into the field, for me, consisted of sitting down at my desk and logging into a virtual game world. After I had officially concluded my research and moved on to writing this thesis, I began to question the parameters of the field and the line between playing *Warhammer Online* purely for enjoyment and playing for research. It is a fieldsite that I can access at any time and one in which I enjoyed conducting interviews and participant observation. The ludic element of MMORPGs is critically important to understanding player experience. Vernacular culture and community in *Warhammer Online* often did transcend the coded game rules and intent of the developers, but it is nevertheless a culture centered on the game and having fun playing it.

The informants I played alongside eventually became friends and, with my period of fieldwork closing, I intended to travel with the Sons of Myrkwood guild to *Aion* as more of a

player than an ethnographer. While an in-depth analysis of culture in *Aion* was beyond the scope of this project, I nevertheless ended up recording the group experience of the move and it happened that it was through standing in *Aion* that I was able to look back at *Warhammer Online* and gain new perspectives for writing this thesis.

The shutdown of Phoenix Throne and the migration of the Sons of Myrkwood proved insightful for me in tying this work together. I initially struggled with how to write a conclusion for a type of game world that, by its nature, has no end. MMORPGs are designed to be persistent places and developers continually scramble to update and expand end-game content. For many players, it is the not journey that matters but the end: players want to reach the maximum avatar level, which is why power-leveling exists. In this society, fully-fledged citizens are those who have reached the end-game and no longer need to develop their avatar but only perform them. Through moving to *Aion*, I concluded that MMORPGs end when players' experience does. One by one my fellow guild members sent around emails with pictures of their unsubscribed status from *Warhammer Online* as the Sons of Myrkwood entered *Aion*.

In the first weeks as a guild in *Aion*, group members helped each other learn the interface and work through quests. The first guild members to make the move now had higher-level avatars and reported back to the rest of the guild about effective strategies to use, areas to avoid and general knowledge of the new world. *Aion*-specific lexicon was translated into *Warhammer Online* terms, such as guilds being known as "legions." Knowledge and experience from *Warhammer Online* traveled with the guild to inform our experience of this new MMORPG. On the server Lumiel in *Aion*, I created a Sorcerer-class avatar, with which I immediately felt at home owing to my experience as a Sorceress in *Warhammer Online*. The caster archetype was

the same: still a glass cannon with similar types of spells, albeit with different names and animations. Other members of the guild also created archetypes similar to their *Warhammer Online* incarnations. Learning a new GUI and new gameplay, like mid-air combat, was a process but made far easier with prior experience with a similar MMORPG.



Figure 6.1 - My Sorcerer, Endaeron, in Alon (screenshot by author)

From flinging fireballs as a Bright Wizard and slinging spells as a Sorceress to soaring above the ground as an entirely different kind of Sorcerer, I have continually recast myself in a series of different identities through the time span of a year and across two different virtual worlds. As discussed in chapter three, the construction of all of these identities involves a postmodern synthesis that draws elements from popular culture and individual imagination. As

narrative blendings of multiple references into single multivocal representations, avatars are both expressive culture themselves as well as experiential vehicles of embodiment and self-perception.

Identity in MMORPGs is always constructed, performed and socially-situated. When viewed from the perspective of game culture, these identities do not so much represent players' actual world lives as they do tools for playing with reality. A broad theme running through scholarship on virtual worlds is concerned with determining actual world patterns of the inhabitants of these worlds: who plays these games, why, and what effect are they having on actual world society? From the period of my fieldwork, everyone I talked to played for their own individual reasons that, I think, may elude the most comprehensive classification or quantification. None of my informants were seeking escape from their real lives, and the avatar configurations they chose to construct and perform did not always reference their actual world lives. Through avatars in the virtual world, my informants could become the Other and continually play with and reconfigure this identity to change social relations. Rather than replacing actual world sociality, virtual community and identity augment the actual world by allowing people to temporarily explore an alternate imagined social reality.

Using interactive media, MMORPGs recreate the magical Other world of literary fantasy, metaphor and oral folktale that humanity has been imagining for millennia. The new media of virtual worlds enable players to visually and socially re-imagine themselves, but, with many traditional actual-world social processes remaining the same, virtual experiences are translated into real meaning that informs and becomes part of a player's actual life.

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Appendix: Glossary of Terms

*Note that capitalization of terms (or individual letters within them) is entirely dependent upon the sender, and generally does not change meaning.

- Addon** A type of player-created software application that is integrated with *Warhammer Online* and often provides some service to players by altering the user's GUI. Addons are typically downloaded from external fan-based community websites and are installed on the player's own hard drive.
- AFK** Common MMO term meaning "away from keyboard." Often used as a social courtesy when in a group to indicate temporary absence.
- Alt** Common MMO term differentiating players' secondary avatars from their primary avatar. A player may create up to nine avatars on one server in *Warhammer Online*, most of which will be considered alts (see: Main).
- Aggro** Abbreviation for "Aggression."NPCs focus their damage output on players dealing the most damage. To "hold aggro" (noun) of an NPC means that a player keeps the NPC's aggression focused on him or herself. A player might also "aggro" (verb) nearby NPCs by moving too close to them, thus drawing their attention and aggression (NPCs in MMOs have a discrete space surrounding them that triggers a scripted response when a player enters it).
- Alliance** A group of socially and tactically united guilds (See: Guild).
- AoE** Also "AE," "Area of Effect" refers to any damage (or an ability/spell that causes such damage) that affects multiple targets at simultaneously.
- Bio** Abbreviation for "biological."Common MMO term said by a player when they are temporarily leaving the keyboard to use the washroom. This term differentiates the player as an organic being from his or her virtual avatar who has no such biological needs.
- BO** Abbreviation for "Battlefield Objective," which is a strategic point on the map that gives rewards when captured or defended.
- Buff** A spell or ability that temporarily increases your or another's skills or abilities. Some classes of avatars can "buff" other players with these abilities.

Burn	Verb. Quickly killing an opponent: a target may be "burned" down fast
Camping	Verb. When players stay in the same spot, especially a resource area or outside of a spawning area such as a warcamp, and repeatedly kill enemy players. Noun. A camper is someone who camps.
Caster	One of several "archetypes" of playable avatar classes; a caster is a class whose primary function is to provide ranged fire support. Casters tend to be poorly-armoured and helpless in close combat but capable of dealing powerful damage.
Dark Elves	A playable race within <i>Warhammer Online</i> . In <i>Warhammer</i> lore, the Dark Elves are an evil banished race seeking to reclaim their traditional homelands and take revenge upon their brethren, the High Elves.
Debuff	See "buff." The opposite of a buff, a debuff removes any buffs from a target or temporarily lowers their skills or abilities.
Destro	Abbreviation for Destruction, one of the two realms in <i>Warhammer Online</i> (See: Realms).
DoT	Abbreviation for "damage over time." This is a type of ability that damages the target for an amount of hit points over the duration of a limited time period.
DPS	"Damage per second." This is a standard MMO term used to reflect how much damage output your avatar can offer. This term can also refer to a type of character, a caster archetype, for example, is a considered a dps class as opposed to a healer archetype.
Elf	A race of sentient beings in <i>Warhammer</i> lore. (See: "Dark Elves" and "High Elves")
Emote	Noun. A series of keyboard combinations intended to be interpreted pictographically as conveying gestures or emotions. Verb. A player may "emote" an emotion or feeling by the use of an emote. Emotes in <i>Warhammer Online</i> may be either key combinations or pre-scripted animations your avatar can perform.
Farming	Verb. The repetitive killing of NPC enemies in the same area, usually undertaken with the intention of gaining experience points, wealth or loot. This has also become linked to commercial "gold-farming," in which external companies employ workers to kill the same NPCs in order to gain wealth or items to sell to players. Noun. Farming is conducted by a "farmer."

Flame	Noun or verb. An insult during a text-based online conversation, usually between relative strangers and often including ad hominem attacks. Flaming someone often leads to a "flame war" involving multiple parties that can often overwhelm a chat system.
FF	Abbreviation for "focus fire," which is an order for all RDPS (See: RDPS) players to target the same enemy and focus their damage output.
Gank	When higher level characters, or a group of characters, ambush and kill a sole player. Ganked, Ganking.
Gobbo	An endearing term for Goblins (see: Goblins)
Goblins	A race of evil, diminutive green-skinned sentient creatures that form a playable race in <i>Warhammer Online</i> (See: WAR).
Guild	An institutionalized, player-created and operated organization within the game. Guilds often function as both tactical units and social groups.
g	Abbreviation for "gold," the main currency with <i>Warhammer Online</i> . 100 copper make a silver piece and 100 silver make a gold piece.
Heal	In the context of <i>Warhammer Online</i> , this term refers to the act of using an ability to restore the hitpoints of another player on the part of a healer (See: Healer). A player may call for "heals" or thank the healer for "the heals."
Healer	One of several avatar "archetypes," which focuses on healing the damage done to party members. The Healer's function is support, which is accomplished by replacing the hit points of team members lost in combat and sustaining the group in combat.
HP	Hit points. This is a common gaming term that provides a measurable numerical depiction of an avatar's vitality. When a character's hit points reach zero he or she dies, and must either respawn or wait to be resurrected.
HoT	Abbreviation for "heal over time." In <i>Warhammer Online</i> , this is an ability that regenerates an amount of hitpoints on the target over a limited period of time.
INC	A text-chat warning that refers to "incoming" enemy players. This is often used in conjunction with a numerical estimate of the size of the incoming force (ie: INC 5), and may also be appended by location (ie: INC 5 east gate). The clarity and length of such INC warnings is dependent upon how much time the player

making the warning has to type (which is usually not much if an enemy group is bearing down upon him or her).

- INF** Abbreviation for "influence," which is one of three types of points earned in *Warhammer Online* by completing appropriate objectives. Gaining influence points unlocks item rewards.
- LOL** Common internet lingo for, "laugh out loud."
- Main** Common MMO term differentiating the avatar a player focuses most of his or her attention on from secondary characters (see: Alts).
- MDPS** "Melee damage per second," in *Warhammer Online* this refers to a type of playable class of avatars that are designed to maximize damage output to targets in close combat.
- MMO** Common gamer abbreviation for "Massively Multiplayer Online," which refers broadly to persistent virtual worlds populated by multiple users. In popular usage this term often refers to virtual game worlds, but this is not necessarily the case. In terms of games, however, MMO also constitutes a genre (as opposed to single-player games and games with a small-scale and non-persistent multiplayer function).
- MMOG** Another abbreviation for "Massively Multiplayer Online Game," referring specifically to virtual game worlds.
- MMORPG** Gamer abbreviation for "Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game." This is a sub-genre of MMOs that can be defined by characteristics of a quest-narrative, depth of character customization and advancement based on experience level.
- Mob** See "NPC." Noun. Refers to a single or group of hostile NPCs.
- Nerfed** When a new patch comes out, the developers may choose to re-balance avatar class abilities often resulting in some abilities being decreased in effectiveness, or "nerfed". Opposite of over-powered (See: OP).
- Ninja** Verb. To "ninja" battlefield objectives or fortresses means a smaller than usual group uses stealth and discipline to capture their objective. Often used when the opposing realm (See: Realm) is dominant in the zone (See: Zone).
- NPC** Common single and multiplayer video game abbreviation for "Non-playable character" (which means an avatar in the game world that is computer-

controlled). These types of avatars often play the roles of guards, animals, merchants or quest-givers that players interact with.

- Nuke** Verb. "nuke that oil." Common term referring to using the powerful ranged magical spells of RDPS classes, particularly the AoE spells of the Sorcerer/Bright Wizard. Noun. Caster classes have spells referred to as a "nukes."
- omw** Abbreviation for the phrase "on my way," used to acknowledge an order or indicate you are still following orders and/or despite a temporary absence from the group.
- OP** 1) Over-powered, referencing a class of avatars that some players may feel are unfairly balanced with powerful abilities. 2) On a chat forum, "original post(er)".
- Order** One of the realms in *Warhammer Online* (See: Realms).
- otw** Abbreviation for the phrase "on the way," used to indicate the player has acknowledged orders and is moving towards the goal.
- Pairing** *Warhammer Online* is divided into three "pairings," or different regions within the world, where each Realm race is opposed to its counterpart. For example, in the Elf lands pairing, Elves are paired against Dark Elves.
- Party** 1) A common MMO term used to refer to a group of players. In *Warhammer Online* a party has six player slots open, after which point it may be expanded into a warband. Anyone can form a party in *Warhammer Online*, though guilds often created closed parties (open to guild or alliance members only) and are often found in PvE areas questing (the party is the smallest unit of grouping in *Warhammer Online*, and rarely seen in RvR areas outside of warbands).
- 2) Party can also be used as a verb, to create the noun described above (As in the question "do you want to party" (meaning, do you want to join a group with another player)).
- Post** Abbreviation for "postern door", of which every keep wall has two. These are essentially backdoors into the keep that defenders can use to circumvent the invading force and strategic points that part of an invading warband should cover.
- PL** verb. Power-level(ing). The act of quickly gaining experience points (and therefore levels), often achieved by avoiding game narrative and focusing on only the most effective leveling methods. This term has become associated with gold-farming companies who offer a power-leveling service.

PT	Abbreviation for the server "Phoenix Throne."
PvE	Player-versus-environment. This defines a state during which players may only engage NPCs in combat.
PvP	Generic MMO term meaning "player-versus-player" (as opposed to "player-versus-environment" or PvE). A state denoting the ability to kill other players, usually those of different faction.
r	abbreviation for "rank" (which is <i>Warhammer Online</i> terminology for character experience "level").
Race	<i>Warhammer Online</i> adopts the popular use of this term to refer to different ethnicities and cultures as well as different species of sentient beings players may play as. Dark and High Elves are the same race, but different cultures; Orcs and goblins share some physiology whereas Humans and Dwarves are different species.
Realm	<i>Warhammer Online</i> is divided into two main factions, or "realms", Order and Destruction.
RDPS	"Ranged damage per second," which refers to casters and other avatar classes that attack targets at a distance.
Region	1) Refers to the Zone you are currently in (See: Zone) and 2) refers to a broad-level of text chat that can be read by anyone within the same Zone.
Respawn	When a player dies in <i>Warhammer Online</i> his or her avatar can return to life at the nearest friendly town or war camp. No penalty is incurred by the player other than having to travel back to wherever the group is located.
Rez	Abbreviation for "Resurrection" (also: "res,"). Healer players have the ability to raise their group members from the dead. Instead of the deceased player respawning far away at a warcamp, a resurrection allows the player to return immediately to the healer's location. By virtue of the nature of <i>Warhammer Online</i> 's PvP focus, player death is frequent and resurrections are in high demand and also a tactical element critical in keeping a group in the field against an enemy.
RP	Role-play. A group activity that adds another social layer of play to the game, in which players speak in character.

RPers	Noun. Players wishing to engage in deeper role-playing of their characters than the standard server social environment allows for.
RPG	Role-playing Game. Can be a reference to either the video game genre or pen & paper games.
Roll	1) verb. (also: "rolled") To "roll" over an enemy, meaning your force destroys theirs 2) Meaning to create character; originating with the physical dice rolls used to create character attributes in pen & paper RPGs.
Root	See: "Snare"
rr	"Renown Rank" – a second type of level, based on player-versus-player combat
RvR	"Realm versus Realm" – the <i>Warhammer Online</i> -specific name of player-versus-player combat.
Server	Community in <i>Warhammer Online</i> is structured around its physical servers. Each server hosts a population of players who regularly interact with each other. Transfers between servers are often not possible. There are three kinds of Servers: Core, which is the standard game sever; Open RVR, which denotes a server that has less restrictions on PvP combat areas; and Role-play, which is meant to attract players desiring greater immersion in the storyline and their characters. Role-play Servers come with a user agreement to follow server rules designed to protect players who want to role-play in chat as well as behaviour and restricts avatar naming options to "serious" role-play names (ie: not AngryOrcWizard69).
SC	Abbreviation for "Scenario," which is an in-game feature in which groups of players from both Order and Destruction are pitted against each other in a time-limited temporary area.
Snare	Term referring to trapping abilities common to RDPS classes that temporarily immobilize targets.
SoR	Abbreviation for a player-created addon (See: Addon) entitled "State of the Realm," which provides players with current strategic information on the attack/defence status of battle objectives and keeps.
Sorc	Abbreviation for the class "Sorcerer." Sorcerers come in both genders and are considered "caster" archetypes (or RDPS), which means they are designed to deal magic damage to targets at a distance.

Spec	A common MMO term referring to a player's chosen specialty or specification (as in configuration of character skills and abilities). In <i>Warhammer Online</i> , every class has three different career paths to choose from, so you might have one sorcerer "spec'ed" in direct damage while another may choose area of effect.
Tank	One of several common MMORPG "archetypes." A Tank is an avatar designed with the primary function of "tanking," or absorbing damage and attention (aggro) from enemies, while the rest of the party deals damage.
Tell	Also: "Whisper"; "PM." Noun. A private message or level of text-based communication involving only two parties.
Toon	Term referring to your avatar.
WAR	Abbreviation for the MMORPG "Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning."
WB	Abbreviation for "warband," which is a <i>Warhammer Online</i> -specific name for a consisting of up to four parties (or 24 people) at full capacity. A warband is a larger social and tactical grouping than a party.
WC	Initialism referring to an RvR Warcamp. The warcamp is where players load when they first arrive in the region for PvP and also where dead players respawn.
Wipe	When a group is overwhelmed by enemy forces and all or most of its members killed, it is considered a "wipe." A group may attempt to "wipe" an enemy group or be "wiped" itself.
WTF	Common internet lingo for, "What the fuck?"
WTH	Common internet lingo for, "What the hell?"
XP	Experience Points, which are an indicator of avatar progression.
Zerg	Noun: a substantial number of players operating under one command. Verb: the enemy is "zerging" means the opposing faction has formed a zerg. "Zerged" references the destruction of a force by an enemy zerg.
Zone	The virtual space on each server is divided into three "pairings," (See: Pairing) one for each race, and within each pairing every map is known as a "zone."

