

SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF WARCRAFT: A  
DISCURSIVE EVALUATION OF A VIRTUAL  
WORLD'S EFFECTS ON ITS USERS

By

JARYD C. HINCH

Bachelor of Science in Geography

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, Oklahoma

2017

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE  
May, 2021

SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF WARCRAFT: A  
DISCURSIVE EVALUATION OF A VIRTUAL  
WORLD'S EFFECTS ON ITS USERS

Thesis Approved:

Dr. Alyson L. Greiner

---

Thesis Adviser

Dr. Rebecca A. Sheehan

---

Dr. Joshua L. Daniel

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have so many people to thank, so I apologize in advance for leaving anyone out. Of course, Dr. Greiner's guidance and support, even more so after COVID, is the reason this project came to fruition; your patience and advice got me through the end, so thank you, thank you, thank you. Rebecca and Josh, your expertise on interview methodology and video game literature built this project from just ideas to a full-fledged research project; thank you for bringing my gaming to my academic life!

To all my friends, both in the real world and in *WoW*. Cassidy, for bouncing a billion ideas off of, RPing constantly, and keeping my chaos in check. Jenna for keeping me sane musically, and Mike and Grant for keeping me sane at home. My girl bosses, Stephanie and Maria Sol, for our Stonewall dates. Nicole, even all the way in Maine, for sharing in our grad school woes. My F45 family at the gym for keeping me physically motivated. Kyle and everything you've done for Equality Azeroth. You're a hero of Azeroth if I ever did see one. My own mom, of course, for always being there for Sonic drinks or a phone call when I need them most. Love you, mudger.

And last but definitely not least, to all the players of *WoW* – without you, this project quite literally would not be possible. Stay golden, my fellow gamers, and as Jaina Proudmoore would say, FOR THE ALLIANCE!

Name: JARYD HINCH

Date of Degree: MAY, 2021

Title of Study: SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF WARCRAFT: A DISCURSIVE  
EVALUATION OF A VIRTUAL WORLD'S EFFECTS ON ITS USERS

Major Field: GEOGRAPHY

Abstract: Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game with an expansiveness, realness, and slew of opportunities that seem to parallel the real world. *WoW* also fosters social interactions with the players with content that requires collaboration, and thus has both player-game and player-player interactions. Current literature has examined these interactions within *WoW*'s virtual space, but there is an absence of studies connecting the two. This project seeks to further evaluate these interactions as well as their relationship with each other. Using LGBT+ players as a sample group, I employed structured interviews to learn how players perceive *WoW*'s virtual world and its conventions (e.g., portrayal of gender) and how the players interact with others. After coding the interview responses, I extracted themes from the responses to connect the two ideas. The results indicated there is a relationship to some degree of how a virtual world is constructed and the social behavior of the world's users. Further, when presented with binaries (e.g., good and evil), players tend to create their own meaning rather than be confined to either-or options. This study explores the applications of social geography in a virtual setting, and lays the groundwork for future virtual social geography studies.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 Research Questions .....	3
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	5
2.1 Introduction .....	5
2.2 Video Game Spaces .....	5
2.3 <i>WoW</i> Literature.....	8
2.3.1 Introduction.....	8
2.3.2 World Building .....	11
2.3.4 Ethnic Studies of Azeroth’s “Races”.....	15
2.3.5 Marginalized Players .....	17
2.4 Conclusion.....	20
III. METHODOLOGY .....	22
3.1 Introduction .....	22
3.2 Recruitment Process.....	22
3.2.1 Forum Postings .....	23
3.2.2 Chat Channels .....	24
3.2.3 LGBT+ Communities .....	25
3.2.4 Internal Guild Recruitment .....	27
3.3 Interview Process .....	28
3.4 Coding .....	29
3.5 Thematic Analysis .....	29
3.6 Limitations.....	31
3.7 Conclusion.....	32

Chapter	Page
IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS .....	33
4.1 Introduction .....	33
4.2 Interview Responses .....	33
4.2.1 Player Demographic Questions.....	33
4.2.2 Azeroth Engagement Questions.....	35
4.2.3 Player Environment Questions.....	40
4.3 Thematic Analysis .....	44
4.3.1 Resisting the black and white, creating the grey.....	45
4.3.2 Unwelcoming space .....	48
4.3.3 Creating space .....	51
4.4 Conclusion.....	52
V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	53
5.1 Introduction .....	53
5.2 Results .....	53
5.3 Limitations.....	55
5.4 Significance and Future Studies .....	56
REFERENCES.....	57
APPENDICES.....	62
APPENDIX A: IRB Approval .....	62
APPENDIX B: Interview Questionnaire .....	63
APPENDIX C: Interview Response Table .....	66
APPENDIX D: Interview Response Coding Key .....	71
APPENDIX E: Consent Form.....	75

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Demographic Questions Responses .....	34
2. Factional Adjective Phrases .....	37

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Gender Comparison for Black Mageweave Leggings .....	38



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

A new player to Blizzard Entertainment's massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft (WoW)* could spend hours on the overwhelming task of creating their first character. After deciding on one of two major political factions in the world of Azeroth – the Alliance, those sworn to uphold traditional nobility and justice, or the Horde, an eclectic band of cultures unified by mutual detestation for the Alliance – the player must decide on one of twelve playable humanoid races within each faction and then one of twelve classes, or roles for their character (Blizzard Entertainment 2020b). The result could be an elusive Night Elf hunter, quick with her bow and companion panther, a bovine-like Tauren warrior, nomadic and strategic with taking up his arms, or even a Lightforged Draenei priest, a spiritual upholder of Light and healing. Once created, the player dives right into the action spanning 12 different zones – expansive continents, shattered planets, or even the afterlife. Each of these huge areas has its own storyline, characters to assist, resources to gather, dungeons to navigate, and monsters to slay. The player can also opt to partake in player-versus-player content (PvP) against players of the opposite faction, further expanding the amount of content and engagement offered by the world.

Teamwork with other players is essential for much of the content offered, encouraging a sense of community within players of each faction. This collaboration can occur with randomly grouped players just long enough to complete the task at hand, but often occurs routinely over

long periods of time within guilds, tightknit social communities of players with similar playstyles and geographic locations. These interactions with other players are not always so collaborative, however; massively multiplayer online games, including *WoW*, have become infamous for discriminatory and elitist discourse within their player bases (Latham 2019). Some player communities, especially female and LGBT+ players, experience discriminatory messages to such extents that it causes them to quit the game entirely (Brehm 2013).

With so many elements, the world of Azeroth is incredibly rich and immersive, providing players with a space that seems to parallel the realness and opportunity of our own real world. Current literature has examined how players perceive this space in *WoW*, as well as how players use the space for social interactions, but there is a lack of literature exploring the connection between the two. Much literature exists connecting the effects of a place on social behavior (e.g., Stedman 2002 who explores the relationship between spatial setting and cognitive reactions and various forms of satisfaction), but studies exploring the potential effects of virtual space on social behavior are still relatively new (Grinberg et al. 2014). This thesis seeks to contribute to this gap of exploring the relationship between virtual spaces and its users' social behavior. To accomplish this, the project recruited LGBT+ players of *WoW* as a sample, since these players are susceptible to discrimination from other players (MacKnight 2013). Specifically, the project employs structured interviews with these players to obtain firsthand accounts of their engagement with the virtual world of Azeroth, as well as their use, perceptions, and experiences regarding the social space offered by *WoW*.

To investigate the connection between these two ideas, I utilize a social geography perspective by looking at the social landscapes of the virtual world of Azeroth and the social landscape of its players, as well as how the two converge. David Ley (1983) originally defined and demonstrated the applications of social geography in his book, *A Social Geography of the City*; in an attempt to explain urban phenomena, data, and patterns, Ley suggested that the social processes and everyday interactions of various social groups (e.g., culture, gender, economic

class) were significant influences. From this, he defines social geography as the intersecting forces of social networks, patterns of housing, residential differentiation, neighborhood change in cities, patterns of poverty, social deprivation, social polarization, and segregation (Ley 1983). Shifting focus from the urban setting, Del Casino (2009) suggests this social geographic lens can also focus on the power relationships in mundane, everyday social interactions between people and different components of their identities (e.g., age, gender, race, sexuality) in a variety of societies (e.g., neighborhood, workspace, cyberspace society). Immersion in Azeroth and collaboration with its users is a prime example of such an everyday social interaction for *WoW* players. Thus, it is relevant to use a social geographic approach to explore the socio-spatial relationships between the world of Azeroth and its players within.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The motivation for this projection largely stems from my own participation in *WoW* over the years. As an active player pursuing the most difficult end-game content since 2007, I have been integrated into the collaborative social community of the game, and often find myself feeling completely immersed in the constructed world of Azeroth. As an *LGBT+ player* since 2007, I have also observed the less benevolent trends within the game's player community, particularly discriminatory messages directed at any real world marginalized group. These experiences, guided by the literature surrounding *WoW*, have led to my research questions:

1. Does Blizzard's construction of Azeroth (e.g., the Horde as "others," a heteronormative framework for much of in-game quests, etc.) have any influence on players? For example, do misogynistic constructs perpetuate sexist social behavior? Are these constructions even noticed?
2. Do *LGBT+* players perceive any of Blizzard's gaming conventions (e.g., portrayals of gender) or other factors within Azeroth to influence social behavior in other players?

3. Are there any correlations between real world identities and in-game perceptions of Azeroth?

As not to predetermine or limit the outcomes, the questions did not probe specifically into one effect, such as the game's construction of gender roles or factional sense of othering. Rather, they were a general exploratory assessment of how players interact with the game itself, and how they perceive Azeroth as a space for others. Answering these questions may shed some light on the effects, if any, a virtual world's design has on its users, as well an exploration into methodologies recruiting interview participants using an MMORPG.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### 2.1 Introduction

Because of *WoW*'s longevity, popularity, and complexity as a virtual world, the game has spawned research from many academic disciplinary perspectives. The subsequent section is arranged by briefly introducing video game spaces in general and the social interactions within them, followed by exploring the breadth of literature surrounding *WoW* and the predominant themes of world building, ethnic studies of Azeroth's inhabitants, and issues regarding marginalized players found within.

#### 2.2 Video Game Spaces

From its origins in the 1960s, the Internet has evolved from a bare minimum, two-user communication system to today's global interface with over half the planet's population engaging in some manner. Many different capacities of the Internet have developed over the years, including the development of virtual worlds – simulated environments in which multiple users engage (Bartle 2004). The benefits of studying virtual worlds are plentiful; perhaps most importantly to a cultural geographer, these worlds are *places* and offer users the capacity for social interaction and culture expression similar to the real world (Hine 2005). Murray (1997) describes these digital environments as having four major properties: being procedural (ability to execute a series of computational rules), participatory (immersive usually through an avatar and offers consequences for actions), spatial (offering navigable space via their avatar), and

encyclopedic (storing vast quantities of data). These characteristics separate virtual worlds from other networked spaces, such as Facebook, in that virtual worlds offer embodiment and a sense of “worldness” through immersion, and persist after the immersion has ended (e.g., one’s social media account will not update if they are logged off) (Boellstorff et al. 2012).

These qualities are exemplified readily in some video games. Video game spaces are certainly spatial and participatory, and because of this “place” quality, have the capability for players to create entirely new narratives within the game based on their own interpretation and comprehension of the environments (Nitsche 2008). In most scenarios within video games, the player assumes the role of a character or avatar of sorts with a specific goal to achieve, typically interacting with non-player characters (NPCs) and the environment to various degrees. While perhaps immersive to an extent – temporarily adopting a new identity in a new place – the player often has little choice in their character’s depiction or fate, instead relying on the game’s predetermined scripted models and outcomes, and the world ceases to function when the game console is turned off. By these standards, most video games are not virtual worlds, but rather a distant cousin (Kelly 2004).

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) are video games that require interaction with other players either in the form of teamwork for player-versus-enemy (PvE) or player-versus-player (PvP) mechanics. Literature surrounding MMOs is of particular interest to this study because, while still not quite considered virtual worlds, their emphasis on player-player interactions translates into virtual world contexts.

A common perception regarding video game culture is that MMO players tend to have toxic characteristics, such as misogynistic or racist language, due to the assertion of “men being better players than women.” Paaßen et al. (2017) surveyed player perceptions regarding this outlook on female inferiority and found that it is nevertheless perpetuated by male gamers on various scales, including different definitions on what constitutes a “gamer;” even female gamers who demonstrated command of a game’s mechanics were rendered essentially invisible and

automatically as less skilled. Latham (2019) built on this idea, describing the so-called “Gamergate” movement in the early 2010s, which brought attention to the increasing sexism and homophobia in video gamer culture following a harassment campaign against feminist game developers. Ultimately, the social trends in players at the time, especially MMOs, seemed to refocus the industry to a younger male demographic, earning female participants the title of “player” rather than “gamer” because of their perceived casual relationship with games. Negative comments became so mainstream that a website was constructed as an archive for misogyny experienced while gaming; the website title, “Fat, Ugly, or Slutty?” harkens to the general comments received that female players are one (or a combination) of these three traits (2015). This, as to be expected, has negative consequences for female gamers, sometimes causing them to withdraw from gaming culture entirely due to the hateful comments received during play (Assunção 2016).

While arguably the most common act of discrimination, hateful language in the online gaming world is not reserved for gender alone. Racist comments in MMOs are seemingly as common as sexist ones, but are masked as not being “real racism” since their occurrence is in virtual space, not the real world. Interviews with players of color who have experienced racist derogatory comments reveal that the coping mechanism for this rhetoric has been largely one of desensitization over time (Ortiz 2019), furthering the historical stigma that people of color should remain silent in the face of discrimination. This mirroring from the real world also presents itself in the LGBTQ player base in that extreme heteronormativity in the world of athletics has translated to extreme heteronormativity in online gaming, producing a fear of being classified as homosexual (Anderson 2009). Tucker (2011) explains this fear, or “homohysteria,” has led to both aggressive comments referring to sexually dominating the perceived homosexual players (usually in the form of “raping”), as well as backlash against game elements that offer the choice (but not force it) for homosexual inclusivity, such as a same-sex relationship option in a game.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are a subtype of MMOs that contain all the elements of Murray's list, and are therefore classified as both video game spaces and virtual worlds (Bartle 2004). These worlds experience social and cultural phenomena just like the real world, including economic trade, political establishments, social gatherings, funerary services for real-world deaths, and even the development of slang or joke terms that help to distinguish players from non-players in the real world (Kelly 2004). Most notably, the social aspect is more developed than in other MMOs because of the larger capacity for more varied and longer interactions; this yields similar patterns of discriminatory language as discussed previously MMOs. Because of these observable traits, MMORPG worlds are arguably as geographic as any place in the real world, and thus have spawned a variety of studies of the virtual inhabitants (e.g., place-building in Wesp and Hayot 2009; gender studies in Jenson and de Castell 2010). However, there remains a gap of literature surrounding the potential relationship of a game's construction as its effects on player behavior

## 2.3 *WoW* Literature

### 2.3.1 Introduction

Released in November 2004, *WoW* dwarfed other games of its time in terms of content and scale (Babalon, Mother of Abominations 2018), and has received eight major expansions over the years, each adding new content, changing the focal point of player activity within the game, and drastically altering the storyline. With each expansion, the game challenged the norms of other video games and the standards for player experiences within games. This perhaps holds especially true for female players, who have seen a marked improvement in their gender's representation in the game. Gone are the days where females in video game worlds can only play the "damsel in distress" stereotype, as was common in the first major video games like *Mario Bros.* and *Final Fantasy* (Ferguson and Donnellan 2017). In *WoW's* earliest content, some of the most prominent characters were female warriors and priestesses who were instrumental in ending



catastrophic demonic invasions, though the “heroes” at the end of the day were always male characters (Blizzard Entertainment 2017). However, the previous expansion of the game exhibited all female leaders of the warring factions; unlike prior expansions’ foci on male characters, *Battle for Azeroth* featured cinematics at the game’s release of all three leading females called *Warbringers*, depicting their physical, magical, and political strength in devising and even instigating wars (Alexander 2018a, 2018b; Messenger 2018). This shift in key figures within Azeroth over the years seems to mirror the changing social and political landscapes of the real world, with the increasing number of females in positions of power, especially global political leaders (Chesser 2019). With almost an even split of female and male players of video games today – compared to the 1980s industry’s almost exclusively male target audience (Chess 2017) – *WoW*’s representation of female as a gender of power and capability seems to further reinforces the concept of Azeroth challenging norms.

Yet, not all players may feel empowered creating their character. Until *Shadowlands*, the most recent expansion, was released in November 2020, players were unable to select non-white features on a human character; a “black” or “Asian” human, for example, could only be made with Caucasian facial features with an overly tan or yellow-tinted skin color. Despite the strides in gender equality in video game worlds over the years and the consequent attention in academic literature (Jansz and Martis 2007), the world of Azeroth presents an underlying problem seen in many other video games: a perpetuation of marginalizing other minority identities in the real world. The issues of race and sexuality – particularly in, but not limited to *WoW* – have been largely neglected, both in game content as well as academic literature (Embrick, Wright, and Lukács 2012). In fictional universes where developers have the capacity to create quite literally any narrative, Nakamura notes that these spaces (including video games) almost always fail to eliminate racism or other identity oppression, and instead develop the same discrimination in other, more disguised manners like fantasy races seemingly detached from the social structure of our real world (Nakamura 2013). Through this lens, Azeroth’s idiosyncratic Trolls, with their

blue and green skin, ritualistic nose and mouth jewelry, and noticeably Caribbean accents, are no longer just another character creation option, but rather a continuation of stereotyping of the real world culture from which they borrow.

In 2008, Jessica Langer adopted this lens and argued that the first release of *WoW* (known as *WoW* Vanilla) constructed a dichotomy between the Alliance and Horde factions in a sense not of traditional “good vs evil,” but rather one of “familiar vs othering” (Langer 2008). Upon first glance, a new player to the game would likely interpret the neat appearances, stereotypically civilized urban development, and just causes of the Alliance as the “good guys,” where the Horde’s more “primitive” way of life – ragged clothing and huts, noticeable lack of urban centers, and “do what it takes” survival philosophies – could be seen as brutish and thus the “bad guys.” Langer attests that this common interpretation of the two factions is actually a digital embodiment of postcolonialism. From a Western-centric perspective, the Alliance races’ civilized cultures and realistic appearances are relatable and familiar to many players, while the Horde races’ barbarism and otherworldly, often monstrous appearances are cast away as the alien and primitive (Langer 2008). Yet, a player could quickly identify that these so-called monstrous races are actually reimaginings of real world cultures who face a similar discrimination as straying away from the “Western standard” of white, Christian, and heterosexual: indigenous Africans as Orcs, indigenous North Americans as nomadic Tauren, Caribbean black cultures as voodoo-practicing Trolls, homosexuals as Blood Elves, etc. From Langer’s perspective, this would suggest that Azeroth constructs its races as a hierarchy of sorts: the civilized “Western” Alliance reigns superior over the “other” Horde.

One then begins to wonder the consequences of these in-game constructions and customization restrictions that seem to mirror the real world. The stark dichotomy between the Alliance and Horde is fundamental to the players of *WoW*: you are Alliance *or* you are Horde, not both. For the first few expansions, this was enforced in-game by preventing players from creating characters of both factions on the same server. This division is especially evident in the real world

when players use the opposite faction as an insult; hearing messages like “you died so easily? You must be Horde trash” implies that simply belonging to one faction reduces your skill level (for examples, see MMO Champion 2020). Discourse on *WoW*’s forum threads supports this seemingly divisive mindset of players. A player posted in the *WoW* forums to gauge how others perceive each faction’s players, almost all suggested faction affiliation predetermined a player’s gaming habits in-game (Blizzard Entertainment 2020a).

As expected, the breadth of studies regarding *WoW* is as large in scale as the game itself. After all, this introduction barely begins to scratch the surface of the game’s complexity as a virtual world. The inventory of literature was nicely categorized by Bonnie Nardi (2009) after she performed an exploratory ethnographic study while playing the game. With no *a priori* objectives in mind, Nardi recorded issues she deemed noteworthy from her interactions with other players and divided the topics by book chapters. These chapters align well with the general themes of other literature surrounding *WoW*. In her experience with raiding guilds and social connections, she introduces the concept of *world building* in *WoW*; her encounters with the multitude of in-game races hint at *ethnic studies* within Azeroth; discriminatory (particularly misogynistic and homophobic) interactions with other players that seem to mirror what she calls discussions in a “boys’ tree house” (Nardi 2009, 89) sets the ground for studies regarding *marginalized players*; and finally, Nardi’s fellow players experiencing addiction opens the door for *real world issues*. Essential examples from the literature surrounding *WoW* are presented and discussed to demonstrate the breadth of studies in each theme, as well as to highlight voids where the literature fails to venture.

### 2.3.2 World Building

Because *WoW* is so large in many regards (player number, world size, content depth, etc.), it is arguably one of the most complex MMORPGs for a player to experience, and thus one of the easiest to immerse themselves within. Toft-Nielsen (2014) isolated three major manners in

which players participate in this immersion into Azeroth: sensory immersion of the game's surface features, such as the sparkling fall of water dripping off a hero's armor or the delicate crunch of a dried leaf under a horse's hoof; challenge-based immersion, or the cognitive focus and engagement demanded of a player when trying to complete an in-game task; and imaginative immersion of the game's imagined story and sense of world, which sweeps the player into action with its frequently emotional plot twists and constant geopolitical struggles between Azeroth. The study's focus group interviews with players suggested that certain player behaviors (emphasis on PvP, PvE, roleplaying, etc.) can participate more dominantly in one of these immersion types, depending on the focus of gameplay. However, in all interviews, immersion occurred in *some* combination of all three, regardless of how little one or two types were reported. This would indicate that to varying extents, Azeroth has an influence on players and their behavior.

Krzywinska (2006) expands particularly on sensory and imaginative immersion by adding the element of mythology participation to the game. She suggests that by players holding a sense of journey by following questlines through various areas, or zones, of the game and by immersing themselves in these storylines, there is a sort of identity tourism being exhibited. Krzywinska notes that players are able to "live" as fictional races through this imaginative story immersion, traveling into Azeroth in the form of their character. The sense of traveling into the game is aided by annual holiday celebrations that mimic and correlate with real world holidays (e.g., Pilgrim's Bounty for Thanksgiving, Feast of Winter Veil for Christmas), complete with themed in-game activities for everyone to celebrate. With a sense of linear and cyclical passage of time added to this mythology building, it would feel that players are really able to "live" within Azeroth.

However, a major aspect that *WoW* has compared to other video games is its social component, which Toft-Nielsen's study neglected. Golub (2010) adds a fourth type to the prior list of immersion types: project-based engagement. A player himself, he experienced immersion firsthand and noted that a huge reason for players to immerse themselves is engaging with others.

In contrast to Toft-Nielsen's interviews, Golub found that for "medium-core" players, or the majority of players who engage more than casual-core play but not to the extent of hardcore professional gamers, world immersion centered around "projects" entangled with others. These projects almost all had a collective goal in mind, such as 10, 25, or 40-man group "raid" dungeons with rewards for everyone involved, or PvP battleground battles between 10-15 players of each faction that reward in-game currencies for the winning team. Other components of Golub's findings, such as a preference for players that participate in raids to turn off in-game sounds in favor of using a voice chat with teammates, further supported the immersion in a social regard.

Engagement in these social regards can occur in multiple capacities. Gui (2018) assessed social interactions with respect to the elements of community (membership, influence on community, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection). By analyzing player text in-game and on *WoW*'s forums, he established the categories of in-game collaboration, alternative communities, and roleplaying communities. In-game collaboration aligns with Golub's findings of raids and PvP battlegrounds – the idea of short-term and long-term group teamwork to reach a goal. Alternative communities exist in the forums as parallels to the in-game world's communities, where players can still interact and create continuing dialogue through forum posts, but not in the virtual space of Azeroth. *WoW* itself is considered a roleplaying game, but more so from the angle of customization options of a character; however, roleplaying communities add a social dimension and offers further immersion from a social regard.

Williams et al. (2006) attempted to identify the social organization of different communities within *WoW*. The authors interviewed players who held membership to an in-game guild to determine the meanings created by players' social engagements as well the complexity of networks created. Many players (60%) reported being a part of "social" guilds, where the foundation was often real world relationships extended into the virtual space, while a smaller number (35%) reported being in a guild designed for raid dungeons. Within both of these,

subgroups of PvP-based and roleplaying-based communities emerged. The most frequent response of players was that the purpose of joining their guild was to play with other players of similar behaviors, or the different types of players such as PvP-focused or roleplaying-focused that Golub (2010) described. Williams et al. suggest that the game thus influences players' social decisions and behavior. It is important to note, however, that the study focuses on the game's technical mechanics (PvE players are united through raiding purposes, PvP players are united through a lust for victory in battlegrounds) and not its construction as a world (cultural histories of the races, storyline, geographies of in-game zones, etc.)

In a different approach, Servais (2015) focused on the idea of world building from the perspective of religion. Another fellow player, he recorded participant observations based around religion and its construction within Azeroth. Specific aspects of the religions in *WoW* are intentionally kept ambiguous as not to replicate or desecrate a real world religion, so the players are left to construct meaning of religion on their own accord. Servais observed that little attention was paid to in-game religions, such as the Light or Elune, but rather players demonstrated religious rituals themselves; this most often occurs in the form of bringing real world funerary sentiments to the virtual space of Azeroth. Many times, players within the same guild are not in close proximity in the real world, so to pay respects to a real world guildmate death, players host memorial services within the game. When a player in China died, over 50 players visited her favorite zone in the game and led a silent walk of reflection in her honor followed by everyone sharing their favorite memories of her. Servais suggests that funerals are lived spiritual experiences, virtual or otherwise, and this idea of lived experience through honoring fellow players creates a sense of religion for players in Azeroth that has more meaning than the Light or Elune from the game's lore.

While covering many aspects of how players build the sense of place for Azeroth, the literature covers either player-world interactions of immersion *or* the social interactions, but not both. The framework for Williams et al. (2008) is quite close, but the focus is on the game's

mechanics and not the experienced construction of Azeroth itself. This leaves room for exploring the relationship between the two themes for Azeroth's potential influence on players' social behavior.

#### 2.3.4 Ethnic Studies of Azeroth's "Races"

Because the playable species are humanoid and not actually *human* (e.g., Naga are snake-like humanoids, Tauren are bovine-like humanoids), biologically they are different from the "Human" ethnic group that mirrors real world humans. Thus, the terms "race" and "species" are interchangeable within Azeroth (Arthaus 2003). With an abundance of these different humanoid species portrayed in game, *WoW* offers fertile ground for assessing virtual world representation of race. However, unlike world building and social communities discussed before, Azeroth's races are not malleable to players. Rather, each race is hardwired by Blizzard and, consequently, predetermined to look, speak, and act a certain way (Galloway 2007). This limits total immersion into their character's shoes by restricting imagined gameplay to the confines of programming. For example, a Horde paladin, a champion of the Light, commands the same holy spiritual energies as an Alliance paladin, but could never enter a cathedral of Light in an Alliance city without first being killed on sight because of the programmed racial behavior in NPCs. Even though a player could imagine their Blood Elf paladin having morals or beliefs more similar to the Alliance than the Horde, the game prevents this from happening because of what Blizzard says the races will be.

Changing perspectives from Azeroth's programming to the ethnographic, Langer (2008) criticized *WoW* for its use of a postcolonial "othering" strategy for the races in the Horde faction. As discussed previously, she asserted that races within the Alliance faction were "ideal" according to Western standards, while the other non-Western ideal races, which are virtual perpetuations of minority identities in the real world, remain ostracized all to the Horde. Consequently, the game's races that reflect indigenous Africans and North Americans,

homosexuals, and Caribbean people are all grouped together as “others,” mirroring real world social ostracization experienced by minorities. From this, Langer argued that, despite its accomplishments and list of “firsts,” *WoW* served chiefly as a testament that racially insensitive (and perhaps even destructive) postcolonialism ideas pervade Azeroth, perpetuating stereotypes that minorities face in the real world.

While Langer employed a comparative ethnographic approach, Pressnell (2013) approached this sense of “othering” from a rhetorical perspective. By analyzing the rhetoric of the game’s created universe, he argues that Azeroth constructs a binary field between the Alliance and Horde (good or evil, civilized or savage, pretty or ugly, intellectual or ignorant) that is largely based on geographic location of the races’ capital cities within the game. For example, Orcs, whose capital of Orgrimmar resides in what resembles a subtropical desert, are seen as less intelligent and more primitive than the Humans, whose capital of Stormwind resembles a developed medieval Western European city surrounded by verdant deciduous forests. Pressnell asserts that players are subject not only to the programming confines discussed by Galloway (2007), but also a sort of virtual environmental determinism as an explanation for Blizzard rationalize creating the races how they did.

This deterministic view is supported by Monson (2012), who argues that *WoW*’s races embody racial essentialism. Her in-game observations developed her argument that the genetic makeup of each race predetermines its role in the world, whether that is the barbaric, warrior nature of the Orcs (despite a main story character being a pacifist Orc shaman), the cunning and hateful arcane-addicted barbs of the Blood Elves (despite its leader willingly working with an Alliance member to thwart a mutual enemy), or the noble and just disposition of Humans (despite one of the top human warriors betraying his race and allying with a demonic force, killing the majority of civilians). It is worthwhile to note that most Alliance races’ capital cities are much closer to each other than the Horde’s, reinforcing the idea of the Horde’s loyalty to each other being one of necessity and not geographic proximity or shared cultural characteristics. Monson



also explores the idea of racial purity in the game, explaining that never in the lore does cross-racial reproduction happen; a Blood Elf-Draenei being has not been produced because the races are theoretically (but not practically) geographically separated within Azeroth. This could also explain why the game's playable races are unable to change specializations in skills; Blood Elves are established as arcane masters, so a character's enchanting skill is innately increased just for being a Blood Elf, even if the player chooses never to pursue enchanting. Like Pressnell's work, however, Monson's study does not explore the potential relationship between all of these ideas and their effects on players.

While these studies approach the idea of Azeroth's races from various angles and methodologies, the major drawback is that none of them relate their findings to players. Where the world building theme literature focused heavily on the players, ethnic studies of Azeroth neglect player input almost entirely. This opens a gap to explore the effects of the games' constructions on players.

### 2.3.5 Marginalized Players

A major component of *WoW*, as discussed before, is the socialization demanded for many of its in-game tasks, like PvE raiding or PvP battlegrounds. Despite its virtual nature, Azeroth's social community is still a community, and thus experiences diversity and the issues related to it – chiefly sexism, sexual orientation discrimination, and racism. Brehm (2013) begins the discussion by surveying forum users on questions related to sexism. Although 64% of the study's respondents reported that sexism is not a serious issue in the game, a coincidental 64% of female respondents reported that they experienced sexist attitudes or comments while playing. The majority of female players experience comments that discredit their playing ability or demand that they return to a domestic role in the real world, but Brehm notes these comments disappear when the gender of the player is hidden. Eklund (2011) also supports this experience of discriminatory comments. The study found that female *WoW* players often feel ostracized from

other players at first simply based on their identity. According to responses, it was possible to overcome this gender barrier, but only by overcompensating on generally very doable tasks (such as reaching maximum level or defeating difficult bosses as a raid group coordinator). A notable difficulty in the study was actually obtaining female interviewees; Eklund found that female players were often isolated from other females in *WoW* compared to their male counterparts, who often played with real world friends. Because no player demographic data exists at a large scale, it remains unknown if Eklund's difficulty stems from a true lack of gender-equal player count or if the need to remain hidden as Brehm discussed is at play, or another reason entirely.

Gender in *WoW* is insignificant from a pure gameplay perspective (a female warrior numerically has as much strength and stamina as her male counterpart), so the issue of gender and sexuality in *WoW* then becomes a social one. Players, of all combinations of masculinity and femininity, bring real world identity to the otherwise lifeless pixels of their characters. Eklund (2011) argues this with her interview responses from female players that indicate an almost universal view of Azeroth being a place for an even playing ground between gender differences. The gender differences then come from the players. This is perhaps challenged by Viamonte (2015) who observed that many predetermined, programmed elements of *WoW* impart real world gender norms, such as the hypersexualization of armor (legplates that appear as thick, bulky barriers on male characters can appear as a thong and shin guards on female characters, despite offering the same statistical values of strength and defense), pre-scripted vocal files for in-game interactions (a joke made by a female human character refers to the stereotype that she automatically knows the tailoring and cooking skills), as well as the base character models themselves (with exaggerated breast and hip size). Even if a player were to bring their own sexual and gender identity to their character, the game's design controls decisions to an extent.

*WoW*'s community has also generated literature on its LGBTQ players. McKenna and Chughtai (2020) immersed themselves in the game for almost three years for an ethnographic analysis of LGBTQ players. Drawing on the critical theory of Foucault, the authors observed the

social activities of an LGBTQ guild, which typically served as virtual counterparts to real world LGBT activities (e.g., Pride festivals) as a means for social empowerment and resistance to discrimination from other players and even Blizzard itself. According to Blizzard, LGBT-focused guilds were against the terms and conditions as they considered it “discrimination against heterosexual players;” in retaliation, members of the then-disbanded guild organized large-scale Pride festivals for their characters, as it did not technically violate the discrimination clause Blizzard tried citing. After a guild member took the case to court, Blizzard doubled down and allowed the guild to reform. This mirrors how LGBT resistance occurs in the real world; members of the community protest and march until legal action “rights the wrong,” so to speak.

Pulos (2013) expands on this idea with a discourse analysis of *WoW* forum posts in a thread titled “LGBTQ players and the WOW Community,” as well as her own personal observations while playing the game. Her critique of Blizzard’s handling of LGBT oppression in the game is two-fold. First, Blizzard discourages discussion regarding LGBT issues by referring the involved parties to the designated forum thread; secondly, questing dialogue from the game’s NPCs are constructed around a heteronormative framework (male NPCs are overly masculine with bulging muscles, gruff voices, and stern dialogue, where women are hypersexualized and frequently characterized as weak, Damsel in Distress-like figures). Blizzard claims that sexual orientation is unnecessary to gameplay, yet, as Pulos argues, it is overtly thrust in the face of every player engaging in the quest dialogues. In her analysis of forum posts, she establishes the support network of *all* LGBTQ supporting players (straight and queer alike) as a check and balance of power to the discursive voices of other heteronormative, oppressive players. Pulos suggests that control of player comments, particularly homophobic slurs, is impossible, but a potential move in the right direction could be Blizzard ending its use of an overly heteronormative dialogue in-game as well as company practices that do not push LGBTQ issues to the fringe (or even outside of) the game.

Skardzius (2015) explored this more specifically by observing how these players have congregated on a particular server, Proudmoore, to create a space of inclusivity and acceptance in a game where heteronormativity and homophobia otherwise continue to reign. She argues that Blizzard has done virtually nothing to curb attacks on LGBTQ and other minority players, refusing even simple community forum language filters or account-wide disciplinary measures for any hate speech. From personal experience, is it not uncommon for a player to be removed from voice chat for sounding “different,” especially in regards to “sounding gay” or speaking English with “an annoying accent.” The majority of Proudmoore’s population resists this marginalization, however, by enforcing player-constructed rules that actively exclude players who exhibit any sort of this behavior. On some level, Proudmoore players’ construction of an inclusive space for minority players could be compared to that of an LGBTQ-friendly city, such as San Francisco or New York City, as a haven of acceptance amidst otherwise exhausting bigotry.

A significant branch of minority players that has been all but ignored by the literature is “race” or ethnicity of players. For a game that has a breadth of literature surrounding the complex racial issues in its world, there is a noticeable lack of studies exploring how a player’s real world ethnicity affects perceptions of and social interactions within Azeroth. While Pulos (2013) and Viamonte (2015) set the stage for assessing the relationship between the game’s construction and real world implications for minority players, there is room to continue this exploration, and particularly to include ethnicity, as well.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This review highlights the intersection of places studies, ethnographic perspectives within the Azeroth, and player studies within the literature surrounding *WoW*. From this, the strengths of the authors’ approaches and findings are examined; in particular, the methodologies of the studies

suggest there is value in employing interviews with players of marginalized identity groups. Further, it presents the gaps in the literature, chiefly that no single project has intersected all three major topical themes. Thus, the review constructs the theoretical and methodological framework for this thesis project to explore the potential effects of Azeroth on players by interviewing marginalized players.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

The literature review revealed the value in interviewing players for obtaining data on perceptions of virtual spaces; thus, I chose structured interviews with *WoW* players as my study's primary methodology. The literature (e.g., Skardzius 2015) has also indicated that LGBT+ players are especially susceptible to discrimination in the game. Because I am also involved in the LGBT+ player community within the game, I narrowed the project's focus to LGBT+ players as the case study sample group. The questions were separated into three main categories: demographic information, questions regarding a player's engage with Azeroth, and questions regarding the player's perceptions and use of the social spaces within the game. From these, I designed coding tables for responses with basic statistical percentages and extracted the major ideas presented using thematic analysis. In this chapter, I discuss the recruitment and interview processes, coding process, thematic analysis and how it helps to answer my research questions, as well as limitations to the study's methodology.

#### 3.2 Recruitment Process

Four methods were used to recruit the study's participants: forum postings on *WoW*'s official website, general in-game chat channels, LGBT+ communities, and recruitment through my own guild. *WoW* is a subscription-based game, and thus requires a monthly subscription to

log in to the game. All four methods, including the forum service external of the actual game, require an active subscription and created character to use. Roleplaying communities were considered, but because these communities are even more niche than the LGBT+ community, they ultimately were not included in this study's sample.

### 3.2.1 Forum Postings

*WoW* offers forums on the official website for players to discuss specific game elements, such as class abilities or design and coding bugs, as well as an "off-topic" section for other discussions. Some players use the forums largely in place of communication in-game, so to reach the broadest audience possible, I made the following recruitment post in the forum's "general game discussion" boards:

"I am a master's student looking for LGBTQ+ players to participate in my thesis research interviews. My project is looking at the potential influence *WoW*'s virtual world has on its players, especially in regards to LGBTQ+ players. The interview should take about 30 minutes, and asks questions about how you play the game and how you perceive the social space using the game. We can conduct this in-game or over Discord. If you are interested, please add me on BattleNet and message me for more information. My BattleTag is xxxxxxxx"

At the time of writing this, the post garnered 72 comments. Of these, about 15% were supportive or neutral of the project, while the rest belittled the project, were personal attacks on me, or were a flagging for moderators to lock the forum thread. Ultimately, this method yielded only one participant. The literature (e.g., Tucker 2011; Pulos 2013) indicated that discriminatory comments were likely when advertising for a marginalized group of players, and this experience supports that indication. This inflammatory language combined with the almost nonexistent recruitment success would suggest that other methods are a better tool when recruiting LGBT+ players in a public forum setting where discriminatory users also have access to posting.

### 3.2.2 Chat Channels

Each zone in the game that a player enters has two chat channels specific to that zone: General and Local Defense. These chat channels are unique to each zone; sending a message to General-Elwynn Forest will not be received by a player in General-Stormwind City. The channels are also restricted to the player's faction, so an Alliance member cannot talk to Horde players, and vice versa. General chat is open to any conversation, and typically involves questions about quests, monsters, or storyline of that specific zone, or *WoW*-centered jokes and slang. Local Defense is reserved for PvP activity, when Alliance-Horde player conflict occurs. In addition to these two channels, major cities and sanctuary zones are also all connected through a common Trade channel, implemented to facilitate trading items and advertising trade skills for others to hire. However, the Trade channel has become infamous over the years for discussing anything *except* trade, with typical topics ranging from real world inflammatory politics to in-game plot discussion, and mental health discussions to *WoW*-based memes (for an example of player discourse on Trade chat topics, see Blizzard Entertainment 2020).

Since Trade chat is connected to other cities, I opted to post my recruitment message in both Trade and General chat of the Alliance's current largest in-game hub zone, Oribos. When logged in, I would post the following message every 20-30 minutes in both channels: "LF LGBT+ players to participate in interview research study. PST if interested," where LF stands for "looking for," and PST stands for "please send tell," or an in-game message. If messaged, I would respond with:

"Hi there! Thanks for the message. My master's thesis is looking at the potential influence *WoW*'s virtual world has on its players' social behavior, especially in regards to LGBTQ+ players. The interview should take about 30 minutes max, and asks questions about how you play the game and how you perceive the social environment of the game. Are you interested?"



If interested, I would then move to the consent and interview portion, discussed in the next subsection of this chapter. However, while I expected this method to be one of the most successful recruitment techniques, I received only one person that expressed interest but ultimately did not even partake in the project. Similar to the forum posting vitriol, I also received many messages questioning why a graduate student would waste time on an identity project like this, explaining that my degree is worthless, expressing dissatisfaction that non-LGBT+ players were excluded from participating, and general belittlement. While it is easy to ignore these messages, the actual recruitment was almost entirely unsuccessful, so I only employed this method for a few days.

### 3.2.3 LGBT+ Communities

Guilds have been a component of the game since *WoW*'s release. These in-game associations of players provide an environment with other players that typically share a preferred play style so that group content is easier to organize, whether it is a quick dungeon run, multi-day raiding experiences, coordinated PvP activity, or just a social environment to chat with other players while doing solo content (Williams et al. 2006). Joining a guild provides other helpful features, such as a collective group bank for items, a guild-specific chat channel, or even pieces of armor that are only sold to members of a guild. Guilds are unique to a game server; a guild named "Azeroth Knights" on the server Dalaran is completely unrelated to a guild named "Azeroth Knights" on the server Tichondrius. However, this changed with the implementation of the "sharding" and cross-realm zone systems, which connected multiple servers of similar real world geographic locations to help server population imbalances (MagicFind 2017). After this implementation, guilds were able to invite players of the same cross-realm group, expanding the potential for community within guilds.

With the pre-release content patch for the *Battle for Azeroth*, *WoW* implemented a feature called "communities." Similar to guilds, communities offer similarly-minded players a chance to

connect. Communities are not restricted to servers within the cross-realm zone groups like guilds, so any player in the game can connect to a community if they wish. However, communities lack many of the perks that a guild offers, such as being able to trade items with members external of the cross-realm zone or the group banking system. Typically, communities offer players of a very specific interest to find other players of that interest; this can be game-related interests, such as roleplaying or playing through old content, or real world interests such sports fans (e.g., basketball discussion) or geographic locations (e.g., Oklahoman players). Many communities exist for LGBT+ players, but most have only a few members. I joined some of these smaller communities, but the combination of inactive players and small membership hindered the recruitment process.

A notable exception is Pride of Azeroth, which boasts over 800 active players at the time of writing this. Voluntary moderators enforce rules, such as no discrimination or antagonism towards other players, as to keep the community chat channel a safe space. Because Pride of Azeroth is the largest and most active community for LGBT+ players, I eventually migrated here and started recruitment. I was able to successfully recruit a handful of participants using a similar recruitment message as the chat channel method: “Hi everyone! I am now recruiting LGBT+ players to participate in interviews for my master’s thesis research. The questions will investigate how you interact with Azeroth itself, as well as how you use and perceive the social environment that WoW offers. Let me know if you are interested, and we can discuss more details!” Prior to posting, I cleared the recruitment message with two of the community’s moderators to ensure I had permission. This method was much more successful than the other general chat channel method, since the community channel was enforced as a safe space and designated as LGBT-related; ultimately, five participants were recruited. I also did not have to rely as much on constant posting using this method, as I eventually became known as “the interview guy” since discussion about the interviews became commonplace within the community channel. This was beneficial in that word about the project was spread even without my involvement, and some

players would wait for me to log in and immediately send me a message of interest in participating. This was likely at least somewhat because of my involvement with the community; instead of just using the community as a recruitment method, I actually inserted myself into the group, having regular conversations and playing in-game content with other members.

#### 3.2.4 Internal Guild Recruitment

My own guild, Equality Azeroth, was born from Pride of Azeroth members wanting an in-game guild for the additional benefits not offered by communities. Not all members played on the same server as the creator of the guild, but due to widespread desire for playing in an LGBT-inclined space, many members created new characters or transferred their old characters to his server, Cenarius. This has led to the guild consisting of very active members, most of which play the game daily, and almost the entire guild roster consists of LGBT+ players (with a few exceptions of allies). Because of these factors, and the fact that I am an active member in normal guild participation, recruitment was quite effortless. I developed a reputation similar to the Pride of Azeroth community as “the master’s student interviewer,” so discussion about my project was increasingly common, especially as interviews began. This method was unexpectedly the source of the overwhelming majority of participants – 21 were members of the guild.

When discussing the project with members from other communities, the topic of Equality Azeroth was usually brought up, and after describing the activeness and supportive environment of the guild, I unintentionally recruited at least five members to migrate and join the guild. Through my project, I felt that I became somewhat of a liaison between the smaller fragmented communities and the cohesive, active group of Equality Azeroth. This suggested to me that LGBT+ players typically prefer to play with other LGBT+ players, an indication that was supported through interview responses discussed in a later chapter.

### 3.3 Interview Process

Once the participant expressed interest, they had the option for the interview to be typed out through in-game messaging or to use the third-party voice chat software, Discord. Discord allows voice chat, text messaging, as well as file sharing, offering the broadest choices for participants. I anticipated some players might not feel comfortable using an external software to do the interview; however, zero participants opted for the in-game option, and 100% opted for Discord. Once recruited, the participants were given a consent information message over Discord that gave more details about the project as well as providing them their rights as a participant (see appendix). If agreed, the participant wrote out “I consent to this project,” and I took a time-stamped screenshot of the message to save to their consent form in place of an actual signature.

Once consented, the participant had the option of having a voice chat call with me or for me to send them a template with the interview questions on it so they could type their responses out. 14 participants opted for the text option and 16 for the voice chat option. Of the 14 text participants, only five were resistant to voice chatting; the text option was largely just an easier option logistically for conflicting schedules, etc. This placed extra importance on questions being worded in a way that would be fruitful for the research but also understandable by anyone. Although voice chat was the preferred method for me as the researcher, the text option opened the door for many interviews I likely would not have received otherwise. In my favor, most participants returned their files within 24-72 hours; three took over a week, thinking they already returned it.

Because of this option between text and voice chat, and the fact that structured interviews do not allow for any further exploration aside from what the questions present, the “interviews” for this project essentially became synonymous with “surveys.” The voice chat option offered perhaps lengthier responses and personal anecdotes were expanded upon more frequently, but ultimately, the “interview process” became a “researcher-guided survey.” This brought to light

the benefit of committing in either direction – less structure for a more personal anecdotal interview experience, or less open-ended questions for a more quantitative survey experience.

### 3.4 Coding

When designing codes for responses, numerical responses in all three question categories were coded directly as the number. The non-numerical demographic questions all had codes that were the first letter of the response: “G” for gay, “M” for male, “T” for transgender, etc. Fortunately, no responses had overlapping letters. For a large portion of questions in the other two categories, it was more beneficial to code by theme rather than individual words. This was done by making a concise list for each question’s individual responses, and extracting themes per each question’s list. Individual word variety was quite high, but the general sentiment of participants was typically unified in three or four categories. I tried to limit responses to a single code where applicable, though some questions (e.g., How would you describe the differences in WoW’s portrayal of male and female characters in the game currently?) elicited a variety of responses within each participant. For these questions, I did not treat them as mutually exclusive categories and instead included all codes (e.g., a response of BP would be counted in both B and P, not a separate BP category). After coding, I calculated basic percentages for each response for easier accessibility for general analysis. A comprehensive list of all responses by count and percentage is found in the table appendix.

### 3.5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is beneficial in exploratory qualitative studies such as this thesis because it offers a method to assess qualitative data obtained, typically through interviews or observations, while maintaining a sense of academic rigor and legitimacy (Clarke and Braun 2017). Nowell et al. (2017) asserts the strength in thematic analysis is its flexibility to adapt to virtually all qualitative studies, regardless of the theoretical frameworks, which proved valuable

in that the project is a convergence of virtual and social geographies. I employed the analytical process following the general sequence as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006); familiarizing myself with the interview responses, coding the responses, and eventually extracting themes presented by the prevalence of codes. Evolving throughout the process, this project began as a deductive approach to thematic analysis, guided by my research questions, but ultimately I allowed the themes to develop independently from the responses in an inductive approach.

Rahman (2017) used this approach of thematic analysis to explore the perceptions of video games and social interactions within players. Gee (2014) notes that this thematic style of discourse analysis has very rarely been used to study how video games are used as a communicational form, but acknowledges the potential value in doing so. He explains that the video game spaces are a communicative form through player-game interactions as well as player-player interactions; by nature, these conversations are turn-taking, responsive, and reciprocal (Gee 2014). If video game spaces are communicative forms, then thematic analysis as Braun and Clarke (2017) defines it is applicable to video game interactions.

For this project, I followed a methodology of thematic analysis similar to Rahman (2017) but with the potential for meaning-creation within players as Gee (2014) described. Using my research questions as loose guides, I compared the coded response percentages within each question to identify prominent ideas from each question (e.g., a large percentage of players said they cannot describe Trade chat discussion topics despite it being one of the most wide-reaching chat channels in the game) as well as comparing questions to other questions (e.g., has the large percentage of players who opt out of Trade chat experienced personal attacks because of their identity?). I widened the scope of analysis a final time to look at the interactions between the three sections of questions and if/how they related back to the three research questions. The themes extracted from this process are discussed in the Results and Analysis chapter.

### 3.6 Limitations

As with any interview process, there is the potential for some information to be lost as I write up the participant's responses. To minimize this, I ensured that it was okay with the participant that I type as they answer. I also notified them that I might take a pause at the end of each of their responses to finish typing, as not to rush the interview process. For those who opted for the text option, I provided them with all my contact information in case they needed any questions clarified. However, even if I was not made aware of any misunderstandings, I cannot know that every question was interpreted the same as the voice chat participants. This is where I especially relied on strong wording of each questions to avoid any potential misinformation.

Another potential influence was the source of most of my participants. Over two-thirds of participants came from the same guild, and while there is diversity present within the members, it is likely that some players share previous experiences in regards to social interactions within the game. I tried to stress that each question was asking for "*your*" experience, not the collectively LGBT+ experience, but because of the similar source of participants, I cannot rule out that overlap occurred.

As noted previously, a methodological limitation is the structure of my interviews which blurred the distinction between "interview" and "survey." While using a structured style of interviews results in easier statistical comparison of the results, it limits the amount of discussion that can occur in the research setting. That is, I received what was wanted from the questions, but the possibilities of further investigation were greatly hindered.

Lastly, as a member of the guild myself, there was potential for personal relationships to influence responses. Though I was still a relatively new member at the time of interviewing, I was not entirely new to everyone. Fortunately, the questions did not relate back to me or our relationship if it existed, so I felt as if any potential history with the participant was irrelevant. However, I cannot be certain of the extent of this influence or lack thereof.

### 3.7 Conclusion

This project's methodology helps to contribute to literature surrounding LGBT+ participants in virtual environments. In the situation of *WoW*, players are completely anonymous behind an avatar (or screenname in the forums) until they choose to reveal any real world identity components. My experience advertising in spaces open to all players indicates that recruitment messages are highly susceptible to discriminatory language and Internet trolling, and statistically were not useful for recruiting participants. The most successful methods were virtual forms of ethnographic participation – joining the community itself. As an LGBT+ player myself, my experience joining these groups was not difficult. For non-LGBT+ users looking to recruit participants, a longer process of joining the community, establishing trust, and building relationships will likely be necessary.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The interview consisted of three sections: demographic information, engagement with Azeroth as a world, and perceptions and experiences with the social space of *WoW*. This chapter will present the findings for each of the three sections and discuss the results of each question (or group of similar questions), and then follow with discussion of the themes extracted from discourse analysis of the interviews. A master chart of all interview response data (count and percentages) is found in the appendix (A3).

#### 4.2 Interview Responses

##### 4.2.1 Demographic Questions

The initial set of questions for participants obtained data while protecting their anonymity, so no names, contact information, or geographic locations were obtained. The following table summarizes the responses. As a whole, the participant sample group was heavily skewed towards males. The majority of males (14 of the 20) identified as cis-gender gay, with only 2 respondents each for transgender, pansexual, and bisexual, and a single demisexual. For female respondents, LGBT spectrum identification was limited to an almost equal amount of transgender (4), pansexual (3), and lesbian (2) responses. For the two genderfluid participants, they did not specify a sexual orientation, only that they identified as genderfluid. Regardless of gender or sexual identification, all but one participant identified as white; two of the three

non-white responses dual identified, so only one participant self-identified entirely as Hispanic. Overall, the average age of respondents was 30.43 years. This average age likely influenced to some degree the overall education of participants; 90% of the respondents had a college education of some type, while the other 10% finished high school.

Question	Response	Count	Percentage
LGBT Spectrum	Gay	16	53.33%
	Transgender	6	20.00%
	Pansexual	5	16.67%
	Lesbian	2	6.67%
	Bisexual	2	6.67%
	Non-binary	2	6.67%
	Demisexual	1	3.33%
Real World Gender	Male	21	70.00%
	Female	6	20.00%
	Genderfluid	2	6.67%
Ethnic Group	White	29	96.67%
	Hispanic	3	10.00%
	Asian	1	3.33%
	Black	1	3.33%
Education	High School	3	10.00%
	Associate's	1	3.33%
	Bachelor's	18	60.00%
	Master's	8	26.67%

Table 1: Demographic questions responses.

In most ways, these results are incongruent with a 2017 demographic survey of players. Venn (2017) found that out of her 506 participants, 57% were female, 49% were bisexual, and 73% were between 18 and 30 years old. While the average age of participants of this thesis mirrors Venn’s findings, the LGBT+ spectrum and real world gender identification responses are significantly different. Multiple factors are likely influencing this, including the fact that my project conducted interviews and not voluntary surveys, Venn’s project boasted almost 500 more respondents than me, and her survey was not limited to LGBT+ players. Despite having many more participants in her survey, it is difficult to expect that her findings are truly representative of *WoW*’s player base as a whole; Venn (2017) admits that her surveys were posted to external

sources, such as Tumblr, Reddit, and the *WoW* forums, and did not recruit many players from in-game. Blizzard Entertainment does not release player or subscription information regarding *WoW*, but the most recent estimations yield approximately 3-4 million (Babalon, Mother of Abominations 2018), so it is difficult to estimate demographic information of the entire population. Despite this uncertainty, it seems that white participants were likely overrepresented in my survey sample, and male participants were possibly overrepresented.

#### 4.2.2 Azeroth Engagement Questions

This group of questions was designed to gauge roughly how immersed in the game the participants were. As a driving force of this study was to assess the potential effects of a virtual world on its users, I wanted a general idea of the extent the participants were even aware of their virtual world – Azeroth in this case. Because no single question is decisively telling of a player's engagement, a large portion of this section is discussed collectively.

Only four of the 30 participants answered that the game's world and lore (storyline, characters and backstories, zones, etc.) influenced their character creation process; the majority answered that either aesthetics or gameplay mechanics was the most important factor. One participant connected gameplay mechanics to their real world identity, saying "...my real disabilities probably have had some influence on [the character] I play. My warrior has high survivability and is hard to kill, so I probably tap into that as compensation for my real life fragility." Four also acknowledged that their character's identity was either a reflection of their real world identity or an alignment of their ideal identity, such as one player explaining that "I want to fully transition to female in the real world, so I want my character in the game to reflect that journey." The majority (68%) made a character of their own gender, and seven of the nine who created an opposite gendered character did so for aesthetic purposes; multiple players echoed the response of "...it just looks and feels better when you're a female [character] killing stuff instead of a guy as usual." *WoW* offers the capacity for players to metaphorically step into a

different pair of shoes through identity tourism (Monson 2012), but this study's sample does not seem to indicate that an appreciable extent of it occurs in the LGBT+ player community.

The questions using the 1-10 scale allowed participants to rate themselves on their engagement alone as well as compared to others. Overall, most players evaluated themselves relatively high – 7.03 – and 20 considered their engagement to be average or above average compared to other players. The majority of players spend most of their playing time immersed in the world, with only four players spending a majority of time in PvP content. A common response mirrored one player's answer: "I like to play old storylines to feel immersed and invested with the vast world, feeling like I'm truly a part of it, whereas other players may only be concerned with doing the most current content just to get the best gear. I feel I play primarily for the story and the world." This indicates engagement with the current content's storyline, quests, characters, and dungeons, as PvP is almost an entirely instanced-style playstyle (i.e., arena matches are quick 2v2 or 3v3 fight-to-the-death encounters between players, and players are removed from the arena as soon as the match is finished, so there is no lore or storyline regarding arenas). While not necessarily guaranteeing attention to the constructed world outside of PvP content, even superficial prolonged exposure to the content likely stays with the players.

The variety of adjectives used by the participants to describe the two factions also suggests moderate engagement to the world of Azeroth. The adjectives were grouped into 11 categories or synonyms in Table 2 on the following page. Blizzard initially constructed the Alliance and Horde to essentially be binary forces; however, this dichotomy of "good and pretty" vs "evil and savage" discussed by Langer (2008) was not entirely reflected by the responses, and instead a grey interpretation of Blizzard's otherwise black and white construction was presented. The majority of participants (20) described the Alliance as peace-seeking, just, or righteous, but only half of them described the Horde as savage or primitive. It is also worth noting that one more respondent (6 vs 5) described the Alliance as evil rather than the Horde, as well as words such as "imperialistic," "colonialists," and "militaristic" which were grouped under the

“Militaristic” code. The Horde experienced much wider variety of interpretation than the Alliance, with nine adjectives receiving two or more responses, compared to the Alliance’s five. Anecdotal discussion from participants that was excluded by coding suggested that Langer’s “othering” theme is noticed by some players; five respondents explained that in their perspective, the Horde’s variety likely stems from Blizzard confining all the races that resemble real world minority groups to the faction while the Alliance is homogenous in variations on the “ideal” of heterosexual, white, and wealthy.

These responses hint that players challenge the binary system as presented by Blizzard. Despite Blizzard attempting to establish the two factions in particular manners, players seem to see through this and instead perceive the “grey” area. The binary of “good guys” and “bad guys” was perceived by some participants, but they predicted that this overly simplistic façade was not convincing to most others. In a way, this also challenges Blizzard’s definitions of good and evil as not just a binary, but a complex spectrum.

Adjective	Alliance	%	Horde	%2
Peaceful and just	20	66.67%	5	16.67%
Evil	6	20.00%	5	16.67%
Elitist	6	20.00%	0	0.00%
Militaristic	4	13.33%	2	6.67%
Developed	4	13.33%	0	0.00%
Diversity	0	0.00%	5	16.67%
Glory-driven	0	0.00%	2	6.67%
Tribalist	0	0.00%	8	26.67%
Rugged	0	0.00%	10	33.33%
Belligerent	0	0.00%	7	23.33%
Misfit	0	0.00%	6	20.00%

Table 2: Adjective phrases used to describe the two factions.

When comparing the two factions in terms of lore bias, half the participants said that Blizzard has favored the Horde in that either they are presented as the underdogs compared to the Alliance, or that the general storyline focuses more on the Horde in some way. A third of the sample said the factions were mostly balanced, and only five said the Alliance was favored. This

suggests it is possible Langer’s “othering” issue was recognized by players, just as a different name. As members of a marginalized group in the real world, the participants may be particularly sensitive to the Horde’s ostracizing by Blizzard. This is perhaps supported by only three participants saying their perceptions of the two factions come from other players; the other 27 responded that attention to the storyline, lore, and gameplay itself was the source of their factional opinions.



Figure 1: A comparison of Black Mageweave Leggings between genders.

Gender portrayals within the game also seemed to receive some attention by the participants. A third of the sample group noted that the game portrays males as overly masculinized (over-exaggerated musculature, brawny size, etc.) and that females are hypersexualized (revealing armor, accentuated breasts, etc.). One female player noted that she chose not to play a female character because “... the representation of female [characters] in the game is ridiculous and misogynistic...[and] was clearly designed by male developers.” Figure 1

serves as an example of this; despite the two human characters wearing the same piece of armor, the male seems to be wearing sweatpants while the female seems to be wearing a bikini. Even fewer commented that Blizzard portrays the genders in traditional fantasy tropes (i.e., males as unintelligent and females as damsels in distress). Twelve players said the two genders are portrayed in a balanced manner, but nine of these also gave conditionals or secondary statements; a response that was coded for both Balanced and Hypersexualized Females said “the game has made a lot of progress over the years [in terms of gender balance], but gear on female characters is still skimpy.”

It is likely the storyline for *Battle for Azeroth* had some influence on this evaluation. *Battle for Azeroth* brought female characters to the forefront of the game, including content other than storyline questing. Because these females often instigated large-scale battles or retaliated against the opposing faction, most of their appearances coincided with a demonstration of power. Twenty-one of the 30 participants considered this trend with female characters to be a factor in the direction of *WoW*'s development; four were unsure but acknowledged the strong presence of females, and only five said the storyline developed on its own entirely. Six respondents noted a possible correlation of *Battle for Azeroth*'s focus on females with the #MeToo social movement's 2017 revival in the United States at the time of its release.

Some respondents also noted a possible correlation between the spotlight on females leading to Blizzard introducing its first openly LGBT+ characters in the current expansion, *Shadowlands*. It could be argued that *Battle for Azeroth* was the first major socially progressive content the game has seen in its history (previously, the game mostly followed the typical fantasy storyline of a major villain being taken down with the help of male faction leaders for each expansion) and participants suggested that because females were now seen as “more balanced” after *Battle for Azeroth*, the next frontier for *WoW* to address is the LGBT+ spectrum. Twenty-seven players acknowledged Blizzard's attempt at bringing LGBT+ representation to the game, but found it to be lacking; only three participants thought the three LGBT+ characters introduced

in *Shadowlands* were sufficient. The average perception of players was that the game had 2.13 LGBT+ characters; this corresponds with the actual number of only three openly LGBT+ characters. The one transgender character reveals their identity in a quest dialogue:

“I appreciate your listening. Truly. As soulbinds, I know I can trust you. <Pelagos takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly.> I had a female form in life. I don't recall my former name, or even my race, but I... never felt like my physical form represented who I was inside. It never felt as clear to me then as it does now. I struggled with that identity for my entire life” (Blizzard Entertainment 2020d).

However, if the player is clicking through quest prompts to level up quickly and not reading the dialogue, Pelagos's identity is missed. Beyond this quest, his identity is not made of importance in terms of gameplay. The other two LGBT+ characters, a gay couple, are also subtly mentioned in quest dialogue, referring to the other as “my husband” (Blizzard Entertainment 2020d). Though, their relationship is not discussed beyond this and is not important to gameplay after this quest. None of these three characters are considered “main” characters, and their identity is made even less important in regards to actual gameplay, so the 90% dissatisfaction rate in responses comes as no surprise.

#### 4.2.3 Player Environment Questions

The average length of players' engagement with *WoW* was 12.16 years, which suggests most participants began playing in their mid-teenage years according to the average age of 30.43 years old. Only eight players ranked escapism as their main reason for playing the game, with four ranking it as the second reason. Overall, the reasons for playing were more or less evenly spread out, with no single reason dominating. Participants' rankings for how their time is spent within the game seems to support the overall level of engagement. Twenty-five players ranked their top gameplay style as either investment in the world or playing current content; 21 ranked



these as their second top gameplay style. The large majority of players also use external sources for information on the game, whether it is to read strategies on playing their class well (28), accessing a database to find help on a quest or item (29), or background information on Azeroth's history and backstories for its inhabitants (22).

Ranking of guild activity introduces the complicated relationship between the participants' engagement with the game's content and the social space. Twenty-one players ranked social activity as their guild's main purpose, while eight ranked current game content as first; inversely, eight listed current game content as second top purpose, and 21 listed social activity. Only one participant classified their guild as PvP-focused guild. As many participants came from the same community (or at least an LGBT+ community), this low variance is expected. Though the guild's focus does not necessarily dictate the individual player's playing focus, it might be inferred that because the guild's focus is social engagement with other players, the player would also be active in the social environment. When asked how often identity components (e.g., gender, ethnic group, age) are revealed in a guild setting, only two reported that players tend to remain anonymous; the others all reported multiple – and 11 said all – identity components being revealed over time in a guild setting, especially closer-knit guilds. Notably absent was the issue of ethnicity; zero respondents said “race” was typically revealed, which parallels the lack of ethnic diversity in the demographics of this sample group. The majority of players also used external sources to communicate with other players outside the game; all but one player used Discord regularly (the one excluded said they preferred it for the interview process and real world friends, but do not use it for *WoW*-related content), about half of the players use phone social media like Twitter or Snapchat as well as text messaging, and five use Facebook. Because much communication also occurs in game, one could infer the use of external sources suggests a deeper connection to the social realm of *WoW*'s space.

However, responses to the rest of this section of interview questions presented an opposing result. A third of participants reported that they do not use their server's Trade channel,

the largest in-game chat channel, while the others reported that while sometimes game elements are discussed, it is almost entirely real world topics instead. All 20 players that use trade chat reported that inflammatory politics are the most frequent discussion topic, followed by 15 reporting discriminatory Internet slang, trolling, or memes. After chuckling or groaning upon hearing “Trade chat” in an interview question, the consensus from all 30 respondents was that Trade chat is a source of concentrated Internet toxicity. To some degree, all players responded similarly to: “in my experience, there’s often a lot of political heat and debate! Politics have been the primary topic in trade chat, and there’s usually some tension.” The 10 players that did not use the channel even said this toxic social behavior discouraged their engagement with most other players so they opted to avoid the channel altogether. When asked if any specific marginalized groups are targeted within chat channel inflammatory messages, 14 players listed one to four specific groups (ethnic group, sexuality, etc.) that were especially vulnerable; the majority of these reported sexuality or gender, likely because of prior firsthand experiences. The other 16 said that no marginalized groups are safe from discrimination.

While joining a zone-wide chat channel is voluntary, playing with others is required for much content in the game. Participants described the quality of social space in these “in-person” character interactions similar to that of Trade chat. When asked about female players, 18 participants reported that skill-based insults (e.g., “you don’t know how to play since you’re a girl”) were commonplace, and half the participants reported objectification (i.e., referring to them as “pieces of meat”). Five reported experiences with female players (or the participants themselves) enduring discrimination or harassment that extended into the real world by stalking on social media, threatening identity theft, etc. The single participant that reported no difference in treatment of females admitted that their exposure to other players is kept so minimal that they have not witnessed any misogyny but have heard stories similar to those of the other participants. When asked specifically about female raid leaders, who would coordinate nine to 24 other players at a time, 12 reported berating by skill-based insults or lack of respect for the female’s raid

coordination, three said they were viewed as particularly skilled because of their gender, and five reported there being no difference. Two of the three reporting a positive perception qualified their answer and said the females were respected because the “others were afraid of making the girl mad,” or that the female adopted a “bitchy attitude and yelled at us” to enforce respect. Over a third of the group had no experience with a female raid leader, which is telling in itself of the gender gap of players in positions of power or authority. In tandem with this, 26 respondents said there was no difference in social interactions when playing a female vs male character; almost all 26 also commented that with many players using voice chat software (e.g., Discord) for better coordination when playing together, most players are assumed to be male unless “proven otherwise” through their voice.

The participants suggested a similar treatment of LGBT+ players within the game. One player reported skill-based insults because of their sexuality or gender, while 13 reported real world harassment (e.g., threatening to harm the player, hacking threats). The same number reported that there is no difference in treatment, but almost all (11) also admitted this is likely because LGBT+ players tend not to reveal their identity unless absolutely necessary, or if playing with other LGBT+ players. Three specifically reported this hiding, saying that LGBT+ players are often exposed to vitriol on such a concentrated level (particularly Trade chat) that it is a natural tendency in the community to not reveal identity. When asked specifically about LGBT+ players in a raid leader position, the large majority (20) of respondents had no experience with an LGBT+ player as their raid leader; this low number could be connected to the sense of hiding mentioned in other answers. For those with a history of LGBT+ raid leaders, four respondents reported skill-based insults, the same number reported positive perceptions, and two said no difference. Three of the four that reported positive perceptions were raid leaders themselves and said their positive experience now was due to them being in an LGBT-focused guild. Their past experiences did not seem as positive: the response of “my only experience [with an LGBT+ raid leader] is with this guild so I’m probably biased. Everyone treats them with respect” was

seemingly negated by other players' responses of "in my past guilds, they always got mansplained by another member who wanted to challenge their authority as leader" or something similar.

These negative accounts of player interactions create difficulty for LGBT+ players navigating Azeroth's social space. The majority of players (23) reported that there have been multiple incidents where they felt they could not safely reveal their identity out of fear of being treated poorly, ignored, or being removed from the group or guild entirely. Only two of the participants found no difference when playing in designated LGBT+ spaces within the game vs non-designated spaces; both players said they never bring their sexuality up in player interactions, so they have never found a difference. Sixteen participants said they follow this trend of staying reserved and only discuss it if absolutely necessary, and 12 said they avoid non-LGBT+ players altogether. While playing exclusively with LGBT+ players is more difficult in terms of organizing playtime around everyone's schedule, content preference, and time zones, the respondents said it was worth the occasional delay to not worry about harassment from other players.

Of the 23 that indicated situations resulting in hiding, all 23 said they navigated these non-LGBT spaces by simply staying reserved in a shell and not revealing their identity. Eleven specifically decided that discrimination similar to what they experienced in the real world created unacceptable playing conditions, so they sought out a guild or community specifically for LGBT+ players (the other seven participants were confident that their playing skill was proficient enough not to require hiding). This correlates with the high concentration of participants from the Equality Azeroth guild and the Pride of Azeroth community.

#### 4.3 Discourse Analysis

In analyzing the responses as a whole, three overarching themes present themselves: a disregard for the black-and-white binaries that Blizzard seems to have once constructed in

Azeroth; the social space as a whole is still dominated by cis-hetero white male player presence; and LGBT+ players, when subjected to this dominated space, create their own spaces as alternatives to resist discrimination. Each of these ideas is discussed in the following sections.

#### 4.3.1 Resisting the black and white, creating the grey

The first theme that presented itself through interviews was the overall rejection of Blizzard's constructed binaries. To some degree, this theme touches on all three major research questions:

1. Does Blizzard's construction of Azeroth (e.g., the Horde as "others," a heteronormative framework for much of in-game quests, etc.) have any influence on players? Are these constructions even noticed?
2. Do LGBT+ players perceive any of Blizzard's gaming conventions (e.g., portrayals of gender) or other factors within Azeroth to influence social behavior in other players?
3. Are there any correlations between real world identities and in-game perceptions of Azeroth?

Much of the literature regarding *WoW*'s constructed world has explored the sense of binary presented by Blizzard's world design choices. Langer (2008) briefly offered the idea of the Blizzard presenting the Alliance and Horde as factions of "good and evil" respectively, and thoroughly explored the idea of them being "the familiar and the others." The binary is furthered by her examples of the discrimination faced by real world marginalized groups being embodied by the Horde races within the game. Yet, the participants did not seem to interpret this according to their responses. The majority of players consider the Alliance to be "peaceful and just" but as many considered them to be evil, militaristic, and elitist. Side commentary in interviews included comparisons to historical Western imperialism and colonialism, noting how they try to present themselves to be a benevolent force, but conquer lands and involve themselves in matters that do not pertain to them. Interpretations of the Horde were much more varied, but overall much more

sympathetic than just a broad classification as “evil.” Most participants described the Horde with phrases like “rugged” or “practical, not pretty,” but only five labeled them as actually “evil,” and instead a variety of descriptors was presented.

This lack of adherence to the “good and evil” binary suggests that LGBT+ players are less keen on following the norms presented by “society,” or Azeroth in this case. I speculate that the variety of descriptors for the Horde is due to LGBT+ players finding some common ground in the faction as a whole. The idea of being misconceived or misunderstood is commonplace in the LGBT+ community, which correlates with the responses regarding the Horde. As players who already are not “the same” as society, there is likely some sense of solidarity, even subconsciously, with the sense of being an “other” as Langer presented. If the sense of solidarity is nonexistent, at the very least I suspect that being an LGBT+ person creates a sensitivity to discrimination or ostracization towards groups of people. These perspectives thus likely mirror the lack of true binaries in the real world (e.g., gender being a spectrum, not an either-or).

Viamonte (2015) discussed the binary of gender as it is constructed within the game, but like the Alliance and Horde binary, this too was seemingly rejected by the participants. In Azeroth, it seems the days of “big strong men” and “weak quiet women” are dead and gone. With the *Battle for Azeroth* expansion, the majority of players suggested that the redirection of focus on female lead characters led to a more equal representation of gender in the game. It is undeniable that the might of Jaina Proudmoore decimating an entire fleet in one spell and the brutality of Sylvanas Windrunner leading a near-total genocide were anything but “weak” or “quiet,” and LGBT+ players perceived this power. This is not to say the participants simply re-categorized their perceptions of females from “weak” to “strong,” however; the grey presented in the Alliance and Horde situation again is seen for the topic of gender. Observations of hypersexualized portrayals of female characters were still noted, even within the same responses of participants that said females were now presented powerfully. Conversely, those who noted the over-musculature and general portrayal of strength of males also noted that they are often portrayed as

brash, unintelligent, or inferior to female characters. These responses indicate that, like with the idea of the factions' morality, gender is not simply an either-or subject.

Overall, this theme suggests a relatively high level of engagement with the world by LGBT+ players, alluding to the second part of the first research question. Both the construction of morality and gender binaries are seemingly noticed by the participants, as no respondent opted not to answer questions of either topic, and the responses were not confined to an either-or binary and instead painted a more colorful spectrum of interpretations. This lack of adherence to Blizzard's binaries suggests a sense of world building within the participants; when the interpretations presented by Blizzard were not satisfactory, players opted to create their own interpretations rather than forcing their views into one of two boxes.

The latter two research questions are more difficult to link to this theme, however. Because the project only interviewed LGBT+ players, it is impossible to tell if the interpretations of these constructions are limited to the binary for all players (or if they are noticed at all). It is also difficult to isolate identity and correlate it with certain perceptions of Azeroth for the third research question, since overall responses were generally similar. For the responses with more variety, the sample size was too small to make any generalizations. Even though a trans woman or two observed a certain aspect does not mean all trans women would observe it; if the sample size was larger and instead 24 trans women noticed something that others did not, then perhaps a generalization could start to be formed, but this was not the case. From this project's data, one could make (careful) generalizations about the LGBT+ community as a whole, but not specific subcategories (e.g., gay white men, lesbian trans women, etc.)

However, two missteps in my methodology prevented this theme to be explored more thoroughly. First, the interview questions were not designed to explore this grey area. Had I previously known of this rejection of binaries by LGBT+ players, my interview questions would have been designed to connect the ideas more strongly, or designed to be more open-ended but ask about specific concepts (e.g., "which actions by the Alliance/Horde do you think were

morally questionable? Which aspects of a faction do you personally identify with, if any?") The finding itself is noteworthy, however, suggesting that when presented with either-or scenarios, LGBT+ users tend to create their own middle ground. The other misstep in my methodology for this theme was the lack of historical comparison of these perceptions. My literature review hinted at this change of gender landscape within *WoW* from its origins to the current expansion, but I did not take this into consideration in my questions. The questions could have been paired (e.g., "how did you perceive gender roles in *WoW* Vanilla/The Burning Crusade? How do you perceive gender roles in the game now, 16 years later?") or spanning across more time (e.g., "how do you perceive gender roles in the game to have changed since you started playing *WoW*?"); this would have helped to provide a more thorough interpretation of the created meaning space between the binary black and white.

#### 4.3.2 Unwelcoming space

When interpreting interview responses regarding the social space of Azeroth, the overall perception of the participants is that the space is still heavily dominated by the "non-minority" person: cis-gendered, heterosexual, white males. In chat channels and other spaces open to any player, LGBT+ players experience similar discrimination as faced in the real world, including barrages of insults, condescension in regards to skill, and even exclusion altogether. This was evident before I even began my interviews with the vitriol towards my chat channel and forum recruitment postings. Whenever something on the LGBT+ spectrum was even mentioned, messages immediately targeted it and attempted to suppress it through mockery and inflammatory language. From the player responses, this type of reaction to any kind of revealing of LGBT+ identity seems to be common if not even expected. One player recalled that on an especially chatty night in a prior guild, members were all sharing personal details about their lives – their hometowns, jobs, relationships, families, etc. When the player tried to discuss his relationship with another male, the general sentiment of the guild was "you are oversharing, no one wants to



hear about that stuff, keep it to yourself,” while the other members continued discussing their personal life details. Several other participants commented on the general treatment from their past guilds that align directly with this – repulsion, exclusion, and attempted silencing whenever their identity was mentioned. This constant suppression might be a factor in why the level of world engagement of LGBT+ players is so high; if the social aspect of the game is as unappealing as the real world’s harshness, then the player then could turn to immersing themselves in the virtual world itself while eliminating the social aspect.

According to the interview responses, female player experience in Azeroth’s social space seems to be just as poor as those in the LGBT+ community. Female players are commonly the brunt of many Internet jokes or insults, often being referred to as “bads” (bad players) or objectified into “pieces of meat.” It is also common to question why the player is even playing, since “girls don’t play *WoW*.” These comments make it clear that because of their gender, female players are generally unwelcome in most game spaces if they want to actually play the game instead of conforming to whatever demands male players issue. A similar experience to the gay player’s guild anecdote was mentioned by a pansexual female participant; her fellow male guildmates were discussing their girlfriends and when the topic of sex was brought up, she started discussing sex from a female perspective and the conversation immediately excluded her because she mentioned the male body. She challenged their opposition, insisting that talking about her boyfriend’s body was no different than their discussion of the female body, but was ultimately excluded from the conversation. Similar accounts from the other female participants support the idea that, unless discussing topics like “one of the guys,” female players are typically shut out from discussions.

This general sense of disregard for both LGBT+ and female players could explain the lack of raid leaders who identify as either category. While it is fairly easy to navigate hateful messages in a chat channel (i.e., one can block the antagonist or simply leave the channel), it is not as easy in a raid setting where a player will spend multiple hours with 9 to 24 other players,

usually simultaneously both in game and in voice chat. Particularly when in a position that gives instructions to the entire raid, the sense of disregard for LGBT+ or female raid leaders often leads to a vicious circle; lack of respect causes instructions not to be heeded, failed instructions lead to all members dying, ultimately a blame is placed on the raid leader for leading the group to failure, which starts the cycle of disregard all over again. Personal accounts from the participants indicated this is frequent when a non-cis-het-white-male is leading the raid, but when a cis-het-white-male is in charge, the blame is shifted back to the players with little to no challenge. This double standard is anything but enticing for marginalized players considering a leadership role, even if fully confident in their ability to lead. Even if a player has not experienced this disrespect personally, it is frequently discussed within the LGBT+ community; because so many participants suggested this poor treatment, this has potentially created a stigma within the community and could be a large factor in the low representation of marginalized players in power.

*WoW*'s lack of LGBT+ and strong female representation in the game until recently could have perpetuated the idea that these players should be excluded from the social spaces by the non-LGBT+ male players. Because the project did not interview non-LGBT+ players, however, there is no data with which to compare the two groups. Regardless, this theme seems to shed some light on the second research question:

Do LGBT+ players perceive any of Blizzard's gaming conventions (e.g., portrayals of gender) or other factors within Azeroth to influence social behavior in other players?

Based on similar experiences from the large majority of participants, the issues discussed in the last theme return, chiefly the improving-but-still-present gender disparity, as well as the lack of LGBT+ representation discussed in Chapter 4. Despite the lack of comparable data, the interview responses present parallels to *WoW*'s world design and types of discrimination experienced by

marginalized players, creating an unwelcoming space to any player that is not cis-male, heterosexual and white.

#### 4.3.3 Creating space

The final major theme extracted through interview responses was the process of LGBT+ players creating a space free of discriminatory or suppressive treatment. When presented with environments as discussed in the prior theme, it is possible that it pushed most of the participants to immerse themselves in the game world rather than partake in the social environment the game offers. However, with the implementation of communities within the game, as well as Discord external from the game, LGBT+ players now have much greater accessibility in finding other LGBT+ players and creating environments free of vitriolic discourse. A large number of participants noted that the feeling of having to hide their identity ultimately resulted in their search for a LGBT-designated guild or community. Because these guilds are still relatively new, however, this pushed the creator of Equality Azeroth to found the guild in an effort to offer consolidated solidarity for players seeking out a discrimination-free space.

It is important to note that these spaces are virtually entirely separate from non-LGBT+ spaces. Rather than participating in two worlds simultaneously, many participants noted that they actively play with other LGBT+ players only, while passively going through the motions when playing with non-LGBT+ players to avoid any sort of uncomfortable interactions. As a whole, the participants of this study seem to have removed themselves from trying to cohabit general chat outlets (chiefly Trade chat, non-LGBT guilds, and random player interactions) and instead created new spaces entirely. In a sense, LGBT+ players claiming space in an otherwise unwelcoming environment mirrors the sense of community resistance to discrimination on the Proudmoore server as found by Skardzius (2015), but on a larger scale than a single server. While this idea does not specifically address the three research questions necessarily, it is useful in

addressing the issue of identifying the potential consequences, positive and negative alike, of perpetuating real world discrimination and binaries within a virtual world.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This thesis overall furthers the understanding the topics of each of the three research questions, but does not necessarily provide be-all and end-all answers to them. Multiple constructions of Azeroth were noticed by LGBT+ players and the influences of these constructions were inferred through their interactions with other players. Because this thesis did not sample non-LGBT+ players, it is impossible to know if these constructions affect non-LGBT+ players, or to determine real world identity effects on these perceptions. The themes extracted from discourse analysis of the responses do, however, present the case that LGBT+ players create meaning in between the two ends of a binary, and when presented with oppressive social spaces even virtually, LGBT+ players will create spaces that accommodate their community to be free of discriminatory treatment.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This project has broadly attempted to identify if and how the design of a virtual world – in this case, *WoW*'s Azeroth – can affect the behavior and actions of its players. Through interviews, I have obtained a deeper understanding of the interactions of these constructions on a marginalized community and how they have navigated this marginalization in the virtual space. This final chapter presents an overview of the results, limitations, and significance of this project.

#### 5.2 Results

My three research questions for this study were largely exploratory rather than pointed. To reiterate, my questions were:

1. Does Blizzard's construction of Azeroth (e.g., the Horde as "others," a heteronormative framework for much of in-game quests, etc.) have any influence on players? Are these constructions even noticed?
2. Do LGBT+ players perceive any of Blizzard's gaming conventions (e.g., portrayals of gender) or other factors within Azeroth to influence social behavior in other players?
3. Are there any correlations between real world identities and in-game perceptions of Azeroth?

The first of these was the question most thoroughly answered by the interview responses. The high level of world immersion and engagement with Azeroth by LGBT+ players suggested that most of the design choices by Blizzard were, indeed, noticed. This is likely at least partly due to the fact that as marginalized players themselves, they are sensitive to marginalization constructions within the game. It is difficult to provide a definitive answer on if these constructions have any effects on all players, especially because the methodology excluded non-LGBT+ players. This lack of definitive answer is noteworthy in itself, as it revealed that meaning in virtual worlds is not black and white, but rather a large grey spectrum created by players.

The findings to the second question help to provide inferences on what the theoretical “definitive answer” for the first question could be. Through LGBT+ players’ social interactions with others, it seems the attempted construction of binaries by Blizzard, a lack of LGBT+ representation, and the traditional portrayal of gender roles – overly masculine men and meek women – have spilled over into the social realm of *WoW*. These constructions parallel the sense of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and general exclusion witnessed and experienced by LGBT+ players in the game’s social landscape – chat channels, guilds, and raids alike. Thus, it could be inferred that there is a relationship between the game’s design and what identities non-LGBT+ players feel are “correct” to fit into Azeroth’s social space based on this design.

The third research question was difficult to answer because of the project’s methodology. Because this thesis only interviewed LGBT+ players, there is nothing to compare to isolate certain identity components with perceptions of Azeroth. However, as a whole, the responses reflect identity as it pertains to the LGBT+ spectrum, and could be compared to a follow up study on another sample group (e.g., straight white males). The sample group, though, remains too small to compare within itself (i.e., how trans women view a topic opposed to gay men).

Unexpectedly, my recruitment methodology presented itself as a finding as well. The presumptive most useful recruitment method was almost entirely unsuccessful and generated more negative comments than anything, while the guild and community methods proved to be

highly effective. Overall, these experiences indicated that spaces where LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ players intermingle are not conducive to recruiting because of the sense of contention and unease, largely out of fear of being treated differently in the game or experiencing another form of discrimination.

### 5.3 Limitations

As discussed before, the project's methodology presented two major limitations. First, the use of structured interviews in a survey-like manner prevented any investigative capability that semi-structured or unstructured interviews allow. While it was useful in statistical evaluation, further ideas and themes could not be produced from this more rigid approach. Secondly, the single sample group prevented one of the three research questions to be answered due to a lack of comparable data sets. This can be resolved by sampling other groups for comparison to be possible (e.g., interviewing non-LGBT players), or expanding the sample size so intra-sample analysis can occur on the LGBT+ spectrum.

Since marginalized players are not necessarily eager to share their identity on the Internet, recruiting participants was more of a challenge than I anticipated. Had I not already been an established, active member of the Pride of Azeroth community and the Equality Azeroth guild at the time of obtaining interviews, my recruitment process would have been significantly slower. The high concentration of participants from these two groups also limits the sample's variety; regardless of how they ended up in the group(s), ultimately they all sought out a space to play and chat with other LGBT+ members. But, this excludes LGBT+ players who prefer to play entirely solo, players that are already in non-LGBT guilds (e.g., hardcore raiding or arena-focused PvP guilds), and even players who might have interpreted my recruitment messages as "bait" to be targets of hate messages or discriminatory treatment.

While players of color are certainly considered marginalized as well, the issue of ethnicity almost entirely avoided mention. While this is potentially a finding in itself, I classify it

as a shortcoming of the project as more attention could have been placed on including this intersectional component. According to the demographic data, whiteness dominates the landscape, even in the LGBT+ community. A follow up study could be employed specifically for players of color to compensate for this lack of data.

#### 5.4 Significance and Future Studies

More than anything, this exploratory project contributes to the literature of social geography, specifically in virtual studies. Utilizing the theoretical structure of social geography as established by Ley (1983) and Del Casino (2009) through the lens of virtual worlds as Gee (2014) described, this project helps to lay foundations for social geography as it shifts to the next frontier of virtual spaces and societies. Specifically, there is merit in pursuing future studies further examining how the LGBT+ player community created their own space to escape social vitriol from other players. Carving out a social space and thus creating an altogether new society (as defined by Del Casino 2009), can be interpreted as an act of social resistance, and thus is grounds for a social geography framework. The project also helped to shed light on virtual recruitment methodologies for the LGBT+ community, revealing the value in immersion and acceptance as a member of the LGBT+ spaces over recruiting in general spaces of the virtual world. This finding translates to any type of social geography project which utilizes a marginalized community as a sample group, but is particularly useful in virtual geographies where discriminatory messages are ubiquitous.



## REFERENCES

- Alexander, D. 2018a. Warbringers: Azshara. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hndyTy3uiZM&t=122s> (last accessed 27 June 2020).
- Alexander, D. 2018b. Warbringers: Jaina. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fo7XPvwRgG8> (last accessed 27 June 2020).
- Anderson, E. 2009. *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*. Routledge.
- Araújo, S. H. de. 2020. Neoliberal representations of Muslims and the Islamic world: a discourse analysis of imaginative geographies in Brazilian local and regional print media. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 0 (0):1–21.
- Arthaus. 2003. *Warcraft: The Roleplaying Game*. Renton, WA: Arthaus.
- Assunção, C. 2016. “No Girls on the Internet”: The Experience of Female Gamers in the Masculine Space of Violent Gaming. *Press Start* 3 (1):46–65.
- Babalon, Mother of Abominations. 2018. Top 6 Most Popular MMORPGs Sorted by Population (2020). *Altar of Gaming*. <https://altarofgaming.com/all-mmos-sorted-by-population-2018/> (last accessed 2 July 2020).
- Bartle, R. A. 2004. *Designing Virtual Worlds*. New Riders.
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2017. *World of Warcraft: Chronicle Volume 2*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books.
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2020a. Alliance vs Horde. *World of Warcraft Forums*. <https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/alliance-vs-horde/419955> (last accessed 15 October 2020).
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2020b. Playable Races - WoW. *World of Warcraft*. <https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/game/races> (last accessed 23 June 2020).

- Blizzard Entertainment. 2020c. Politics in Trade chat. World of Warcraft Forums.  
<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/politics-in-trade-chat/616522> (last accessed 21 February 2021).
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2020d. World of Warcraft: Shadowlands. Activision Blizzard.
- Boellstorff, T., B. Nardi, C. Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press.  
<https://princetonup.degruyter.com/view/title/563172> (last accessed 30 July 2020).
- Brehm, A. 2013. Navigating the feminine in massively multiplayer online games: gender in World of Warcraft. *Frontiers in Psychology* 4.  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00903/full> (last accessed 18 September 2020).
- Chess, S. 2017. *Ready Player Two*. University of Minnesota Press.  
[www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7z7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7z7) (last accessed 27 June 2020).
- Chesser, S. G. 2019. Women in National Governments Around the Globe: Fact Sheet. Fact Sheet :11.
- Del Casino, V. J. 2009. *Social geography: a critical introduction*. Chichester, U.K. ; Wiley-Blackwell.
- Eklund, L. 2011. Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players. *Convergence* 17 (3):323–342.
- Embrick, D. G., J. T. Wright, and A. Lukács. 2012. *Social Exclusion, Power, and Video Game Play: New Research in Digital Media and Technology*. Lexington Books.
- Fat, Ugly or Slutty. 2015. <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/> (last accessed 25 October 2020).
- Ferguson, C. J., and M. B. Donnellan. 2017. Are Associations Between “Sexist” Video Games and Decreased Empathy Toward Women Robust? A Reanalysis of Gabbiadini et al. 2016. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 46 (12):2446–2459.
- Galloway, A. R. 2007. “Starcraft,” or, Balance. *Grey Room* (28):86–107.
- Gee, J. P. 2014. *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual Worlds and Video Games*. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oks-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1715785> (last accessed 24 March 2021).
- Golub, A. 2010. Being in the World (Of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism, and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game. *Anthropological Quarterly* 83 (1):17–45.
- Grinberg, A. M., J. S. Careaga, M. R. Mehl, and M.-F. O’Connor. 2014. Social engagement and user immersion in a socially based virtual world. *Computers in human behavior* 36:479–486.

- Gui, D. A. F. 2018. Virtual Sense of Community in a World of Warcraft® Storytelling Open Forum Thread. *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research* 11 (2).  
<https://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/index.php/jvwr/article/view/7281> (last accessed 1 November 2020).
- Hine, C. ed. 2005. Virtual methods and the sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge. In *Virtual methods: issues in social research on the internet*, 1–13. Oxford: Berg  
<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/lib/griffith/reader.action?docID=513987&ppg=15> (last accessed 30 July 2020).
- Jansz, J., and R. G. Martis. 2007. The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games. *Sex Roles* 56 (3):141–148.
- Jenson, J., and S. de Castell. 2010. Gender, Simulation, and Gaming: Research Review and Redirections. *Simulation & Gaming* 41 (1):51–71.
- Johnstone, B. 2018. *Discourse Analysis*. Newark, UNITED STATES: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oks-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5179354> (last accessed 24 March 2021).
- Kelly, R. V. 2004. *Massively multiplayer online role-playing games: the people, the addiction and the playing experience*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.
- Krzywinska, T. 2006. Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories: World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture* 1 (4):383–396.
- Langer, J. 2008. The familiar and the foreign: playing (post)colonialism in World of Warcraft. In *Digital culture, play, and identity: a World of Warcraft reader*, eds. H. Corneliussen and J. W. Rettberg, 87–108. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press [http://ls-tlss.ucl.ac.uk/course-materials/ANTH3001\\_54457.pdf](http://ls-tlss.ucl.ac.uk/course-materials/ANTH3001_54457.pdf) (last accessed 2 July 2020).
- Latham, A. S. 2019. I, Gamer: Addressing Toxic Ludology and Narratology in the Gamer Discourse Community Through Reinterpreting Video Games as Hypertexts. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2374256869/abstract/9A30200BC6FB4E80PQ/1> (last accessed 25 October 2020).
- Ley, D. 1983. *A social geography of the city*. New York: Harper & Row.
- MacKnight, M. W. 2013. Saving prince peach: A study of “gaymers” and digital LGBT/gaming rhetorics. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1476208574?pq-origsite=primo> (last accessed 18 March 2021).
- MagicFind. 2017. CRZ is getting really old - Blue Tracker. Blue Tracker.  
<https://www.bluetracker.gg/wow/topic/us-en/20752570814-crz-is-getting-really-old/> (last accessed 21 February 2021).

- McKenna, B., and H. Chughtai. 2020. Resistance and sexuality in virtual worlds: An LGBT perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior* 105:106199.
- Messenger, M. 2018. Warbringers: Sylvanas. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVp7yLfnmrE> (last accessed 27 June 2020).
- MMO Champion. 2020. Horde and Alliance presentation and perception. From NPCs to Playerbase. [threads/2544334-Horde-and-Alliance-presentation-and-perception-From-NPCs-to-Playerbase](https://www.reddit.com/r/WorldofWarcraft/comments/2544334/Horde-and-Alliance-presentation-and-perception-From-NPCs-to-Playerbase/) (last accessed 15 October 2020).
- Monson, M. J. 2012. Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture* 7 (1):48–71.
- Murray, J. H. 1997. *Hamlet on the holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace*. New York: Free Press.
- Nakamura, L. 2013. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. Routledge.
- Nitsche, M. 2008. *Video game spaces: image, play, and structure in 3D game worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.  
<http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780262255110> (last accessed 30 July 2020).
- Ortiz, S. M. 2019. “You Can Say I Got Desensitized to It”: How Men of Color Cope with Everyday Racism in Online Gaming. *Sociological Perspectives* 62 (4):572–588.
- Paaßen, B., T. Morgenroth, and M. Stratemeyer. 2017. What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture. *Sex Roles* 76 (7):421–435.
- Paltridge, B., and K. Hyland. 2012. *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction* 2nd edition. New York: Continuum.
- Pressnell, L. 2013. Building a “World of Warcraft”: Cyber-colonialism through “othering” strategies. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1418465746/abstract/EA74A1B30B364B42PQ/1> (last accessed 29 July 2020).
- Pulos, A. 2013. Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games: A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture* 8 (2):77–97.
- Rogers, A., N. Castree, and R. Kitchin. 2013. social geography. In *A Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford University Press  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199599868.001.0001/acref-9780199599868-e-1708> (last accessed 28 November 2020).
- Servais, O. 2015. Funerals in the ‘World of Warcraft’: Religion, polemic, and styles of play in a videogame universe. *Social Compass* 62 (3):362–378.

- Skardzius, K. 2015. Playing with Pride: Marginalized Players Claiming Space Through Community Building and Equity Enforcement in World of Warcraft. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1826042508/abstract/9C2502AC020045A3PQ/1> (last accessed 29 July 2020).
- Stedman, R. 2002. Toward a Social Psychology of Place. *Environment and Behavior* 34:561–581.
- Toft-Nielsen, C. 2014. Worlds at Play. *Nordicom Review; Gothenburg* 35 (s1):237–250.
- Tucker, S. 2011. Griefing: Policing masculinity in online games. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/917743232/abstract/A6428E26D09D461CPQ/1> (last accessed 25 October 2020).
- Venn, A. 2017. World of Warcraft Demographics: How Who You Are Affects How You Play.
- Viamonte, C. M. 2015. You crit like a girl: The performance of female identity in the virtual gaming community World of Warcraft. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1845297333/abstract/D8115B63CDBB4535PQ/1> (last accessed 18 September 2020).
- Wesp, E., and E. Hayot. 2009. Towards a Critical Aesthetic of Virtual-World Geographies. *Game Studies* 9 (1). [http://gamestudies.org/0901/articles/hayot\\_wesp\\_space](http://gamestudies.org/0901/articles/hayot_wesp_space) (last accessed 27 April 2020).
- Williams, D., N. Ducheneaut, L. Xiong, Y. Zhang, N. Yee, and E. Nickell. 2006. From Tree House to Barracks: The Social Life of Guilds in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture* 1 (4):338–361.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: IRB Approval



#### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Application Number: IRB-21-30  
Proposal Title: SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF WARCRAFT: A DISCURSIVE EVALUATION OF A VIRTUAL WORLD'S EFFECTS ON ITS USERS

Principal Investigator: Jaryd Hinch  
Co-Investigator(s):  
Faculty Adviser: Alyson Greiner  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s):

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved**  
Study Review Level: Exempt  
Modification Approval Date: 04/22/2021

---

The modification of the IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46. The original expiration date of the protocol has not changed.

**Modifications Approved:**

Modifications Approved: Change title from "A hero in Azeroth and the real world? Evaluating the influence of World of Warcraft's virtual space on players" to "SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF WARCRAFT: A DISCURSIVE EVALUATION OF A VIRTUAL WORLD'S EFFECTS ON ITS USERS"

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved.
2. Submit a status report to the IRB when requested
3. Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
4. Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the OSU IRB and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
5. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Sincerely,

Oklahoma State University IRB  
223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078  
Website: <https://irb.okstate.edu/>  
Ph: 405-744-3377 | Fax: 405-744-4335 | [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)

## APPENDIX B: Interview Questionnaire

### Player Demographic Questions

1. Where on the LGBT+ spectrum do you identify?
2. What is your real world preferred gender?
3. Which ethnic group do you identify with?
4. What is your age?
5. What is your highest level of education?

### Azeroth Questions

1. What is your main character, and why did you choose that? (e.g., male human warrior, female blood elf mage)
2. On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being not at all and 10 being very engaged, how would you rate your engagement with the game's world? Storyline, characters, lore, etc.
3. How would you compare your engagement with the game's world (story, lore, etc.) to other players? Why?
4. Where do you spend the majority of your time in Azeroth? Why?
5. What words come to mind if you were asked to describe the Alliance as a whole? The Horde?
6. What specific experiences constructed your perception of the factions like that?
7. How do you evaluate the balance of the Alliance and Horde in terms of racial composition?
8. Which elements of the game's world, if any, do you feel have influenced your playing style?
9. On a scale 1-5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being very important, how important is it:
  - a. that a game treats male and female characters equally?
  - b. that a game has LGBT+ representation in its characters?
  - c. that a game's company handle discrimination issues inside and outside the game?
10. How would you describe the differences in WoW's portrayal of male and female characters in the game currently?
11. To what extent, if any, do you feel Battle for Azeroth's focus on female main characters had on the direction of the game's development?
12. To your knowledge, how many LGBT+ characters exist in WoW's lore?
13. What is your evaluation of *WoW*'s inclusion of LGBT+ representation?

## Player Environment Questions

1. How long have you played *WoW*?
2. How would you rank the reasons that you play *WoW*? Rank all that apply.
  - a. Social interactions
  - b. Sense of working towards a goal
  - c. Pure entertainment
  - d. Escape from real world
  - e. If other reasons, please describe
3. Rank the following game content in priority for your play style:
  - a. PvP
  - b. Raiding
  - c. Mythic+ Keystones
  - d. Exploration of zones and lore
  - e. Pet Battles
  - f. Legacy Content
  - g. Achievement Hunting
4. Which types of external sources, if any, do you consult for information on the game?
  - a. Gameplay mechanics (e.g., IcyVeins, Noxxic)
  - b. Lore (e.g., WoWWiki, WoWPedia)
  - c. Databases (e.g., Wowhead)
  - d. Theorcrafting (e.g., Raidbots simulations)
  - e. Other (Please describe)
5. If you are in a guild, rank the content that your guild emphasizes:
  - a. Social
  - b. PvE
  - c. World PvP
  - d. Rated PvP
6. Which external communication methods, if any, do you use to connect with players outside of Azeroth?
  - a. Discord
  - b. Facebook
  - c. Phone social media (Twitter/Instagram/Snapchat)
  - d. Text messaging
  - e. Other
7. Which elements of the game are ever discussed, if any, in trade chat? (NPCs, story plot, zones, etc.)
8. How would you describe the social environment of trade chat on your server? What things are often discussed?
9. Are any real world identity aspects discriminated against in typical in-game chats? If so, which one(s)? Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, education levels, employment, etc.
10. In your experience with other players, particularly with guild mates, what elements of a player's real world identity (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age) are typically disclosed by other players? Are certain elements excluded?
11. What differences, if any, are there between a player choosing a male vs. female character?



12. How do you evaluate the way female players are treated by other players in the game?  
LGBT players?
13. In your experience, what are the differences, if any, in how a female raid leader is treated compared to her male counterpart? An LGBT raid leader?
14. What are the differences in how you spend time in LGBT+ spaces vs. non-LGBT+ spaces in the game?
15. As an LGBT+ player, have there been situations where you feel you cannot reveal certain real world identity components (gender, sexuality, race, etc.)?
16. If so, how did/do you navigate these non-inclusive spaces?

APPENDIX C: Interview Response Table

Section 1: Player Demographic Questions

Question	Response	Count	Percentage
LGBT Spectrum	Gay	16	53.33%
	Transgender	6	20.00%
	Pansexual	5	16.67%
	Lesbian	2	6.67%
	Bisexual	2	6.67%
	Non-binary	2	6.67%
	Demisexual	1	3.33%
Real World Gender	Male	21	70.00%
	Female	6	20.00%
	Genderfluid	2	6.67%
Ethnic Group	White	29	96.67%
	Hispanic	3	10.00%
	Asian	1	3.33%
	Black	1	3.33%
Education	High School	3	10.00%
	Associate's	1	3.33%
	Bachelor's	18	60.00%
	Master's	8	26.67%
Average Age	30.43 Years		

Section 2: Azeroth Questions

Question	Response	Count	Percentage
Character	Same Gender	19	67.86%
	Different gender	9	32.14%
	Aesthetic	17	56.67%
	Lore	4	13.33%
	Gameplay mechanics	11	36.67%
	Real world identity	3	10.00%
Average Engagement	7.033		
Engagement Comparison	Above average	17	56.67%
	Average	3	10.00%
	Below average	10	33.33%
Time Most Spent In...	Current content	22	73.33%
	PvP	4	13.33%
	Old content	4	13.33%
Alliance Adjectives	Peaceful and just	20	66.67%
	Evil	6	20.00%
	Elitist	6	20.00%
	Militaristic	4	13.33%
	Developed	4	13.33%
	Diversity	0	0.00%
	Glory-driven	0	0.00%
	Tribalist	0	0.00%
	Rugged	0	0.00%
	Belligerent	0	0.00%
Misfit	0	0.00%	
Horde Adjectives	Peaceful and just	5	16.67%
	Evil	5	16.67%
	Elitist	0	0.00%
	Militaristic	2	6.67%
	Developed	0	0.00%
	Diversity	5	16.67%
	Glory-driven	2	6.67%
	Tribalist	8	26.67%
	Rugged	10	33.33%
	Belligerent	7	23.33%
Misfit	6	20.00%	
Experiences for Adjectives	Gameplay mechanics	14	46.67%
	Lore	18	60.00%
	Playerbase	3	10.00%
Factional Balance	Alliance-favored	5	16.67%
	Balanced	10	33.33%

	Horde-favored	15	50.00%
Game Influences	Gameplay mechanics	9	30.00%
	Lore	17	56.67%
	Social aspects	2	6.67%
	None	6	20.00%
1-5 Scale Question 1 Average		4.533	
1-5 Scale Question 2 Average		4.3	
1-5 Scale Question 3 Average		4.7	
Gender Representation	Overly masculine males	9	30.00%
	Hypersexualized females	9	30.00%
	Unintelligent males	2	6.67%
	Damsel in distress	3	10.00%
	Powerful female	18	60.00%
	Balanced representation	12	40.00%
Influence of <i>Battle for Azeroth</i>	Affected direction	21	70.00%
	Females did not affect	4	13.33%
	No effect	5	16.67%
Average # of LGBT+ Characters		2.1333	
Evaluation of LGBT+ Representation	Good	3	10.00%
	Needs improvement	18	60.00%
	Poor	9	30.00%

### Section 3: Player Environment Questions

Question	Response	Count	Percentage
Average Play Time	12.166 Years		
Reason for Playing (First)	A, social	9	30.00%
	B, working towards goal	7	23.33%
	C, pure entertainment	6	20.00%
	D, escapism	8	26.67%
Reason for Playing (Second)	A, social	9	30.00%
	B, working towards goal	6	20.00%
	C, pure entertainment	11	36.67%
	D, escapism	4	13.33%
Game Content Rank 1	a. PvP	3	10.00%
	b. Raiding	8	26.67%
	c. Mythic+ Keystones	2	6.67%
	d. Exploration of zones and lore	12	40.00%
	e. Pet Battles	0	0.00%

	f. Legacy Content	2	6.67%
	g. Achievement Hunting	3	10.00%
Game Content Rank 2	a. PvP	2	6.67%
	b. Raiding	3	10.00%
	c. Mythic+ Keystones	12	40.00%
	d. Exploration of zones and lore	4	13.33%
	e. Pet Battles	2	6.67%
	f. Legacy Content	4	13.33%
	g. Achievement Hunting	3	10.00%
External Sources	Gameplay mechanics	28	93.33%
	Lore	22	73.33%
	Databases	29	96.67%
	Theorycrafting	10	33.33%
Guild Priority Rank 1	Social	21	70.00%
	PvE	8	26.67%
	World PvP	0	0.00%
	Rated PvP	1	3.33%
Guild Priority Rank 2	Social	8	26.67%
	PvE	21	70.00%
	World PvP	1	3.33%
	Rated PvP	0	0.00%
External Communication	Discord	29	96.67%
	Facebook	5	16.67%
	Social media	14	46.67%
	Text messaging	13	43.33%
Trade Chat Topics (Game)	Don't use	10	33.33%
	Lore	9	30.00%
	Gameplay	8	26.67%
	None of these	5	16.67%
Trade Chat Topics (Non-game)	Don't use	10	33.33%
	Politics	20	66.67%
	Internet slang/memes	15	50.00%
	Real world trading	5	16.67%
# of Minority Groups Targeted	One	2	6.67%
	Two	8	26.67%
	Three	2	6.67%
	Four	2	6.67%
	All	16	53.33%
# of Identity Aspects Revealed	Two	5	16.67%
	Three	2	6.67%
	Four	10	33.33%
	All	11	36.67%
	None	2	6.67%

Male vs Female Character	Social differences	4	13.33%
	No difference	26	86.67%
Female Player Treatment	Skill-based insult	18	60.00%
	Real world insult/harassment	5	16.67%
	Objectification	15	50.00%
	No difference	1	3.33%
LGBT+ Player Treatment	Skill-based insult	1	3.33%
	Real world identity harassment	13	43.33%
	Hides identity to avoid harassment	3	10.00%
	No difference	13	43.33%
Female Raid Leader Treatment	Skill-based insult	12	40.00%
	No difference	4	13.33%
	Positively-viewed	3	10.00%
	No experience	11	36.67%
LGBT+ Raid Leader Treatment	Skill-based insult	4	13.33%
	No difference	2	6.67%
	Positively-viewed	4	13.33%
	No experience	20	66.67%
LGBT vs non-LGBT Spaces	Do not use non-LGBT space	12	40.00%
	Reserved when using	16	53.33%
	No difference	2	6.67%
Uncomfortable/Unsafe Situations?	Yes	23	76.67%
	No	7	23.33%
Navigating These Situations	Stay reserved	23	76.67%
	Sought out LGBT space	11	36.67%
	Did not care	7	23.33%

## APPENDIX D: Interview Response Coding Key

### Section 1: Player Demographic Questions

1. LGBT+ Spectrum
  - a. L, Lesbian
  - b. G, Gay
  - c. B, Bisexual
  - d. T, Transgender
  - e. N, Non-binary
  - f. F, Gender-fluid
  - g. P, Pansexual
2. Preferred Gender
  - a. M, Male
  - b. F, Female
  - c. G, Gender-fluid
3. Ethnic group
  - a. W, White
  - b. H, Hispanic
  - c. A, Asian
4. Age
  - a. Numerical scale
5. Highest Education
  - a. H, High school
  - b. B, Bachelor's
  - c. G, Master's

### Azeroth Questions

1. Character (Multiple codes)
  - a. M, Male
  - b. F, Female
  - c. A, Aesthetic
  - d. L, Lore
  - e. G, Gameplay mechanics
  - f. R, Real world identity

2. Engagement Scale
  - a. 1-10
3. Comparison
  - a. A, Above average
  - b. V, Average
  - c. B, Below average
4. Most time spent where?
  - a. C, Current content
  - b. P, PvP content
  - c. O, Old content
  - d. R, Raids or mythics
5. Adjectives for factions
  - a. P, Peaceful and just
  - b. D, Developed
  - c. E, Elitist
  - d. M, Militaristic
  - e. V, Evil
  - f. I, Diverse
  - g. T, Tribalist
  - h. R, Rugged
  - i. B, Belligerent
  - j. F, Misfit
  - k. G, Glory-driven
6. Experiences for #5
  - a. G, In-game playing
  - b. P, Player base
  - c. L, Lore reading
7. Faction balance
  - a. A, Alliance-favoured
  - b. B, Balanced
  - c. H, Horde-favoured
8. Game influences on playing
  - a. M, Gameplay mechanics
  - b. L, Lore
  - c. S, Social
  - d. N, None
9. Scale questions
  - a. Use 1-5 scale
10. Gender representation (Multiple codes)
  - a. M, Overly masculine males
  - b. H, Hypersexualized females
  - c. U, Males as unintelligent
  - d. D, Damsel-in-distress trope for females
  - e. P, Powerful females
  - f. B, Balanced representation
11. Influence of BfA on development
  - a. F, Female presence directed game in some way



- b. S, Storyline was first, “female” did not matter
  - c. N, No influence
- 12. # of LGBT+ Characters
  - a. Numerical scale
- 13. Evaluation of LGBT+ Representation
  - a. G, Good
  - b. N, Good first step but needs improvement
  - c. P, Poor

### Player Environment Questions

1. Playing length
  - a. Numerical scale
2. Rank reasons to play (2.1 and 2.2)
  - a. Letter that they chose first
  - b. Letter that they chose second
3. Rank game content (3.1 and 3.2)
  - a. Letter that they chose first
  - b. Letter that they chose second
4. External game content (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4)
  - a. Y, Yes
  - b. N, No
5. Rank guild (5.1 and 5.2)
  - a. Letter that they chose first
  - b. Letter that they chose second
6. Communication methods (6.1, 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4)
  - a. Y, Yes
  - b. N, No
7. Trade chat (in-game)
  - a. L, Lore
  - b. G, Gameplay
  - c. N, Nothing game-related
  - d. D, Do not use trade chat
8. Trade chat (non-game)
  - a. P, Politics
  - b. I, Internet slang
  - c. R, Real world item trading
  - d. D, Do not use trade chat
9. Minorities targeted
  - a. Numerical Scale for components listed
  - b. A, “Anything is fair game”
  - c. N, None
10. Player identity components
  - a. Same as #9
11. Male vs Female
  - a. S, Social differences

- b. N, No difference
- 12. Female Players
  - a. S, Skill-related insults
  - b. O, Objectification (“treated like a piece of meat”)
  - c. D, Real world discriminatory comments
  - d. N, No difference
- 13. LGBT Players
  - a. S, Skill-related insults
  - b. H, Harassment that extends to real world
  - c. A, Hides identity to avoid harassment
  - d. N, No difference
- 14. Female and LGBT Raid leaders (13.1 and 13.2)
  - a. S, Skill is assumed to be lesser
  - b. P, Positively viewed by other players
  - c. N, No difference
- 15. LGBT vs Non-LGBT spaces
  - a. D, Do not interact with players in non-LGBT spaces
  - b. R, Reserved but still interact
  - c. N, No difference
- 16. Situation where revealing identity was not okay
  - a. Y, Yes
  - b. N, No
- 17. How did you navigate if yes
  - a. R, Remained reserved and did not reveal anything
  - b. G, Sought out an LGBT guild
  - c. D, Did not care

## APPENDIX E: Consent Form

### **Consent for participation in a research interview**

*A hero in Azeroth and the real world? Evaluating the influence of World of Warcraft's virtual space on players*

#### **Oklahoma State University**

I agree to participate in an interview for the research project led by Jaryd Hinch, geography master's student at Oklahoma State University, which seeks to assess the potential relationships of *World of Warcraft's* virtual world on its players' behavior. The process should last approximately 15-20 minutes. There are no explicit benefits from participating. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms and rights of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1. The aims of the project and the purpose of my role as an interviewee have been explained and are clear to me.
2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate. Participation requires only being interviewed by a researcher, no further steps.
3. I have the right not to answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview, I have the right to not answer a question or withdraw from the interview.
4. I understand that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed because of the online nature of the study, but the following precautions will be taken:

- a. My character's name will only be used to sort responses, and will not be used in analysis.
  - b. All potential identifying information (e.g., age, ethnic group) will be removed when discussing data.
  - c. No singular response will be discussed.
  - d. Demographic information will only be used for statistical analysis, not identification.
5. I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. If I have further questions, I can contact the PI, Jaryd Hinch, at [jaryd.hinch@gmail.com](mailto:jaryd.hinch@gmail.com), or the faculty advisor, Dr Alyson Greiner, at [alyson.greiner@okstate.edu](mailto:alyson.greiner@okstate.edu).

Screenshot of participant's consent:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

