Seeking Fulfillment: Comparing Role-Play In Table-top Gaming and World of Warcraft

Popular Abstract - In the midst of the massive growth in the numbers of people participating in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), study of the role-playing within these games is increasingly marginalized, as role-playing servers are developed to segregate player bases and as scholars increasingly focus on the non-role-playing aspects of online game play. We seek to address that disconnection by studying relative levels of fulfillment and frequency of tabletop and online role-playing for *World of Warcraft* (WoW) subscribers.

Finally, demographic information taken from the players themselves aids in guiding future research about which type of role-play gamers are more likely to participate in and find fulfilling. By looking at the age, location, and gender of players the relative merits of each type of role-playing is discussed, pointing to strategies to capitalize on the strengths and minimize the failings of each venue for role-playing. This study aids both the online and offline gaming industry in better understanding their target role-playing audiences, while providing a grounded study of avid role-players to support

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ABSTRACT

Through ethnographic research and a survey of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) players, this study assesses the relative fulfillment and frequency of online and offline role-playing for WoW players. Although players were divided on the issue of fulfillment, they overwhelmingly engaged in role-playing online more often because of the logistical complications of offline role-playing. Ultimately, we found that role-players' preferences for on or offline play were driven by a preference for the open-ended design of tabletop role-playing and a desire to meet a critical mass of role-players online at their own convenience.

1. INTRODUCTION

After swilling down a few beers at Bruuk's, Gordrum straightens his uniform and prepares to form up with the rest of his regiment. Moments later, he's marching in file out of Ironforge shouting his company's battle cry: "Do or Die! Axes High! Mithril Shield HUZZAH!" Gordrum swells with pride as he marches stoutly past the numerous onlookers greatly admiring their formation. Then, just after reaching the city limits of his race's greatest city, Gordrum and the rest of his regiment break ranks and double-time en masse toward the airfield to the north. As Gordrum calls his trusty bear companion to his side, he thinks of his comrades-in-arms. The bear's fierce loyalty to him is not unlike his own devotion toward to his unit – the Ironforge Regiment. They train and fight alongside one another in order to rid the land of the loathsome Horde. As Gordrum's legs begin to tire from miles of the tedious and relentless motion, he pushes himself onward remembering two things. First, he recalls his sworn promise to his Dwarven King, that he would not stop fighting until he has seen either the Horde's destruction or, light forbid, the end of his days amidst this war-torn world – whichever comes first. The other thing that surfaces in Gordrum's mind is that, after the Ironforge Regiment conducts their scheduled drill at the airfield, Gordrum is line for a promotion. Life is good.

Throughout history, people have played games that transport them to different worlds. Today, we

play games in new and evolving ways. We continually discover new ways to connect, communicate, interact, and play games with one another via technology like the internet. According to Internet World Statistics (Anonymous 2007), there are currently over 212 million internet users in the United States. At the turn of the millennium, 8% of all non-adolescent Americans claimed that they played games, and by 2003 that number rose to 37% and rises to this day (Williams et al. 2006). Although this research was conducted nearly three years ago, the numbers speak for themselves. The fact is simple; more than a third of the U.S. population communicates online.

We approach this subject because we are, in fact, two of the growing percentage of people who play online video games. The above account is a narrative retelling of one of Jason's experiences playing as his character, Gordrum, within the online game, *World of Warcraft* (WoW). This tale is one of many accrued in our experiences from playing role-playing games (RPGs[1]) and is representative of a sub-group of WoW players, those who actively role-play their character experiences while playing WoW. As technology has progressed, role-players are no longer limited to offline role-playing and are now faced with multiple potential outlets for game play, as online RPGs offer a viable competitor to offline role-playing experiences. The changing context of gaming, and the increasing focus on analyzing synthetic worlds, led us to analyze how developments in online gaming change the context of role-playing.

1.1 The Social Benefits of Online Gaming

Many communication scholars believe we should study video games. Dmitri Williams (Williams 2006) states, "We should study games now because these networked social games are a wholly new form of community, social interaction, and social phenomenon." Some prior scholarly discussions of technological and online communication from scholars like Ray Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1989) and Robert Putnam (Putnam 2000) claim that technology has corrupted social institutions and destroyed social interaction entirely. However, communication scholars like Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006) claim that such previous social research incorrectly views contemporary media as "a root cause for the decline of civic and social life

in the United States rather than a mechanism for its maintenance (if not restoration)."

Through computer-mediated communication we are capable of communicating with one another like never before. Now, we are able to communicate by instantaneously leaping around the world (Murray 1997). This technology, allowing instantaneous communication over thousands of miles, changes the ways in which people connect with one another socially. Social spaces are being moved online because it is exponentially quicker and easier for people to find and communicate among a particular niche of society when they are online. The previous bars, bowling alleys, and clubs that Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1989) refers to as "third places" are now available via the internet. Role-players are no longer limited to a table-top game with friends, as they may pursue a similar group through any number of online outlets. As Steinkuehler and Williams note, our social spaces are not lost; they have moved online and are mediated by computers (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006).

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By connecting over the internet we are provided the opportunity to bond to others with similar interests and values, without the limitation of geographic proximity. This allows us to build new cyber-worlds that, in turn, harvest countless online communities that substitute for our former "third places." Gurak (Gurak 2003) states, "As in all communities, participants… [are] linked by… common values, yet in the virtual world, these links… [are] not limited by physical distance or time." The internet has, in fact, increased our capacity to connect with others like ourselves. This new ability not only fosters new social connections, but also strengthens previously existing ones. Similarly, Sherry Turkle (Turkle 1995) claims, "We

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[1] A role-playing game is defined by www.dictionary.com as: "a game in which participants adopt the roles of imaginary characters in an adventure under the direction of a Game Master." This is perhaps one of many similar definitions of role-playing available.

join virtual communities that exist only among people communicating on computer networks as well as communities in which we are physically present." Overall, the internet has greatly increased the number of virtual communities that function like offline social institutions.

Role-play is also fostered by the anonymity that typifies most online communication. Gurak (Gurak 2003) claims, "The power of the computer to mask identity, gender, and other features has been discussed since the early days of computing." Because we are able to reinvent our personalities, interests, gender, and countless other aspects of ourselves online, there are role-playing possibilities online that simply are not matched by table-top role-play. Turkle (Turkle 1995) observes the power of anonymity in MUDs[2] claiming, "As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction."

As people roam through virtual communities they create versions of themselves that can become as real as their own lives. This is role-playing; the creation of a character that inhabits a world separate from its creator. What many people accomplish with an anonymous blog, a clever email pseudonym, or a unique online nickname is nearly identical to what role-players achieve when they create and play a character. As the online personality one can create may be very similar to the creator, it not surprising that the lines between the person and the character can occasionally blur. Turkle comments on role-playing via MUDs,

> "When people can play at having different genders and different lives, it isn't surprising that for some this play has become as real as what we conventionally think of as their lives, although for them this is no longer a valid distinction." (Turkle 1995)

This is not to say that role-players are crazy, unless they are as insane as the person who employs hides his/her real life identity when posting a public online journal. Anonymity encourages interactivity in the online space by allowing people a significant amount of privacy, access, and presence (Gurak 2003), which for role-play means an unparalleled level of immersion into a "game."

1.2 The Importance of WoW

Online role-playing dates back to the 1970s and the original MUD, but the development of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) has redefined online gaming. With increasingly immersive graphics, persistent worlds and player bases – ranging from the hundreds to the millions – role-players have living, graphically rich worlds they can choose as settings for their role-play. Currently, the most popular MMO is Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (WoW).[3] In fact, according to Blizzard (Blizzard 2007), in July of 2007 WoW set a new benchmark for an MMO player base with over nine million subscribers. The sheer number of players interacting and communicating in one game sparks interest in many scholars. Many of these scholars (Krzywinska 2006; Mortensen 2006; Taylor 2006; Williams 2006; etc.) argue that studying WoW is one of the best ways to obtain both a working knowledge of the social structure within online communities and a better understanding of game studies as a whole.

1.3 The Purpose of Role-Play

Two scholars delve deeply into the study and purpose of role-play – specifically the table-top genre. First, Fine believes that, when role-playing, people actually become the characters they create through the acceptance of rules and envelopment of self into the created character (Fine 1983). Fine states that people tend to blur the line between self and created self. Second, Dormans (Dormans 2006) claims,

> "Like all games they [RPGs] consist of rules that operate within virtual game worlds. One has to learn these rules to be able to play the game … as many rulebooks stress, there are no winners and losers in a roleplaying [sic] game. Neither is there a fixed goal."

Role-playing games seem to depend more on "playing" than on "gaming." According to Dormans, the purpose of role-play is not to achieve some sort of win condition, but instead to simply interact with others in the same virtual world. If Dormans is correct, then it is the interaction among players and their characters that becomes the most important aspect of role-play.

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[2]A MUD is a Multi-User Dungeon or Multi-User Domain. MUDs are considered the first multiplayer online role-playing games. For more information see chapters one and two of Turkle (Turkle 1995).

[3] Blizzard Entertainment, founded in 1991, is a division of Vivendi Games and headquartered in Irvine, CA. Blizzard released its first Warcraft game "Warcraft: Orcs and Humans" in 1994. Since then, the company has released numerous other titles including multiple games continuing the Warcraft mythos. Blizzard launched WoW in 2004 and its expansion "The Burning Crusade" in 2007. Currently WoW has more than nine million subscribers. For more information see the company's profile: http://www.blizzard.com/inblizz/profile.shtml

Coupling this idea with Fine's allows an interesting connection. Many people simply like pretending to be someone else. This particular idea is traceable through the later MUDs and into modern role-play occurring in games like WoW. If the views of Fine (Fine 1983) and Dormans (Dormans 2006) on role-play fall in line with the concepts that Turkle (Turkle 1995) and Gurak (Gurak 2003) apply to online communication then the overlap between the two suggests that computer-mediated communication, in many ways, facilitates role-playing. Role-play depends on interaction and anonymity – at least while a player is acting the role of character – two aspects inherent to online communication according to Gurak (Gurak 2003). Likewise, the speed and reach (Gurak 2003) of computer-mediated communication via the internet facilitates social interactions like role-playing by providing players easier ways to assemble.

1.4 The Differences Between WoW and Table-Top Role-Play

The study of online gaming – particularly in WoW – is a worthwhile endeavor. One understudied aspect of WoW (Williams et al. 2006) is the characteristic of role-play most prevalent on role-play servers.[4] The concept of role-play, that games like WoW have adopted, is not new, but the practices of role-playing are distinct enough from general online gaming practices to warrant study in their own right. As Markus Montola argues, "role-playing can be perceived as a game playing motivated with narrative desires, focused on creating imaginary worlds and based on making decisions on how personified characters act in imaginary situations"(Montola 2005). Not only did role-play exist online in the days of the MUDs, but it also thrived in basements and around dining room tables all across America through the distribution of role-playing materials from companies like TSR.[5] Since the mid-1970s there have been table-top or pen and paper role-playing games that gave birth to the genre itself. These games facilitate role-play among players much like their online descendents, but in the case of these original games interaction among players occurred face-to-face. WoW, on the other hand, provides

role-play in a fundamentally different way because the communication is mediated by a computer.

As the motives of role-players are generally different than the rest of the gaming population, role-playing within WoW is subject to limitations that are not present in offline role-playing. Montola argues that there are several factors that impact role-playing within an online game, including the persistence of online worlds, the lore surrounding the online game, and need to disregard "unsuitable game elements," which are often the actions of other players (Montola 2005). As WoW is a game played by millions of other players, role-players must adapt their role-playing to an existing, limited computer program, certain aspects of offline role-playing are undercut, most notably the role of the game master, or GM.

In table-top role-play, the fictitious world within which players interact exists solely in the players' imaginations. This imaginary world is first created and arbitrated by one of the players who does not play, but instead controls the game play. This particular player is known as the GM. The GM typically follows a set of rules laid out in a predetermined role-playing game book. In WoW role-play, the players and the world are not only presented visually via a computer screen, but the actions and physics of both are also controlled by the game's programming. In the case of a game like WoW, programming enacts many of the roles of the table-top GM and mediates almost all in-game interactions. One underlying difference between the two mediums is that, in table-top role-play, the fictional world is continually co-created by interactions between the players and the GM. This leaves room for the human imagination to fundamentally alter the fictional universe in any number of ways. One example might be a GM overlooking a rule in the game's rulebook in favor of a better role-play experience. A table-top GM can also introduce and develop new characters or fundamentally redefine the world in which players are role-playing. However, in WoW role-play, the decisions of the players and the very world itself is cemented within the programming that Blizzard has created (Mortensen 2006). In a computer game

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[4] There are four types of servers within WoW: Player versus Environment (PvE), Player versus Player (PvP), and Role-Play (RP), Role-Play Player versus Player (RP-PvP). PvE concentrates on combat between the players and the world within WoW. PvP centers on player versus player combat. RP focuses on role-play within WoW while pitting the players versus the world in WoW. RP-PvP concentrates on role-play within WoW while simultaneously placing the focus on player versus player combat. My guild, the Ironforge Regiment, was on a RP-PvP server.

[5] Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) was originally formed in 1973 by Gary Gygax and Don Kaye. The company was the first to publish the popular Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) RPG. After going through many changes over the years involving names, logos, and partners, the company was finally bought out by Wizards of the Coast (WotC) in 1997. Currently WotC publishes the - still popular - D&D and other RPGs.

like WoW, the fictitious world and all it contains is limited to the game's programming, whereas the contents of world in a table-top game is limited only to the players' imaginations. This is not to say that Azeroth does not change; in fact, the programmers at Blizzard continually add updates to the game. But these updates do not foster role-play the same way a human GM can look at his players and make a game-altering decision.[6]

Although WoW and other games have retained the title of GM for their game masters, the role of GMs in an online game is typically far different from table-top GMs. Instead of dynamically creating and adapting the world to players, online gaming GMs are far more likely to facilitate answers to basic questions and remedy minor problems (Blizzard 2008). To this end, Blizzard's GM position is advertised as "customer service," rather than as a position in game design (Blizzard Entertainment 2008). In other games, like

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EverQuest and A Tale in the Desert, GMs are often players who have been given the title "GM" to either help out new players or solve minor in-game issues (ATITD Wiki 2008). Players can certainly create events and dynamic content within online games, but, unlike table-top, they are subject to strictures inherent to a computer program-as-GM paradigm. Specifically because of the programming of WoW, a dwarf cannot role-play deserting the Alliance to become a member of the Horde, a troll would find it quite difficult turn his back on the orcs of Ogrimmar, and players cannot even change their hair cut or other core elements of their appearance. Automating the role of the GM certainly decreases the number of people needed to administrate an MMORPG, but it does so at a cost to the narrative freedom within which role-playing storylines can be developed.

With the ability to build communities online, the immersion provided by graphics, and other aspects of online communication combined with the

increasing number of people colonizing synthetic worlds (Castronova 2006), role-players are offered a choice: do they play online, offline, or both? In order to evaluate this choice, this case study will look (primarily) at two things: which type of role-play players find more fulfilling and which type of role-play players participate in more often. Answering these two questions will provide a better understanding of how this subgroup of players goes about their role-playing and traits of those who favor each type of role-playing.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Role-players that participate in both role-playing within WoW and table-top were the target participants for this study. We combined qualitative and quantitative research methods by coupling autoethnography and survey data. The autoethnography was designed to add depth to the research, while the survey work offered a more representative sample of the role-playing population of WoW and point to areas where our autoethnographic observations could be generalized. Our survey sample size is small, but conforms to our autoethnographic results. Despite the small sample, our survey, in combination with our autoethnography, demonstrates clear findings about the differences between table-top and online role-playing. Although both members of the research team have logged hundreds of hours playing WoW, the autoethnographic observations in this essay are from Jason's experiences playing as Gordrum, a member of the Ironforge Regiment.

2.2 Measures and Procedure

2.2.1 Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (Ellis and Bochner 2000) claim, "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural." Additionally, one goal of autoethnography "is to use your life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture" (Ellis and Bochner 2000). If our goal is to compare the level of fulfillment gamers receive by role-playing through WoW versus their experiences within offline table-top role-playing, then using our own experiences

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[6] A human GM, for example, could look at his players and decide based on the group's interactions, whether or not to alter an encounter. As a GM, one can lengthen or shorten a combat scenario in order to draw out or appease the group. Jason, as a GM, has often given an enemy that the players are fighting more hit points (making the enemy live longer in the encounter) and causing the players to worry more for their survival. At the same time, as table-top GM can instantly kill an enemy in order to satisfy a players frustration with rolling poorly. A computer program cannot adapt to its players this quickly and thus cannot provide the same sort of game for its players as a human GM can.

would be a crucial part of understanding and interpreting the overall results of the research project. We feel that our table-top role-playing experience more than qualifies our use of autoethnography. Jason has table-top role-played for over six years and is currently one of only seven RPGA[7] approved GMs in Huntsville; Christopher has more limited table-top role-playing experience, but has played WoW since its launch and has previous experience in other online role-playing games. Autoethnography is a solid fit for research in role-playing, as both authors are active members of an understudied online group. This type of study offers a depth of research that shares details about an understudied community to better understand it. We also believe that autoethnography is a sound option for online gaming research, as the belief that researchers should play the game they study is being adopted by other online game researchers (Williams and Skoric 2005). Much like Nick Yee's (Yee 2006) analysis seeks to counterbalance qualitative research with quantitative survey analysis, we feel that autoethnography balances survey results with deep, detailed experiences to help better understand online gaming in general and role-playing in particular. Ultimately, autoethnography leverages a depth of research and detail in analysis to understand the complicated narrative practices and behaviors of role-players in WoW.

2.2.2 Survey

In addition to autoethnography, we employed the use of a survey to collect a snowball sample. As in previous research done within WoW (Williams et al. 2006), survey results provide breadth to support analysis of game dynamics. Building from Nick Yee's quantitative analysis of "the myriad motivations of play among MMO players," and "exploration of how these motivational factors can provide us with analytical tools to describe and understand the preference for and effects of game-

play for different kinds of players," we sought to better generalize our experiences on why a person would prefer one type of role-playing over another via surveys of WoW players (Yee 2006). In order to obtain survey results on something like role-playing we compiled a number of questions concerning how people identify themselves and find fulfillment as role-players in WoW and in table-top role-playing games. Our survey included questions involving basic demographic information and general familiarity with online and offline gaming, role-playing, and WoW. However, we also included two open-ended questions: Which type of role-play do you find more fulfilling and which have you participated in more often in the last month?

Jason distributed the survey by posting it on the twenty-two WoW role-playing realm forums. The plan was to allow anyone checking the forums to complete the survey and email it to the address given. The reason the WoW role-playing realm forums were chosen was that the people most likely to check these forums would be the specific participants we were looking for. After posting the survey and waiting for initial responses, we reposted the survey on the Blizzard forums and were suspended by Blizzard, which entails a temporary ban from posting and a deletion of all threads that we started, resulting in substantial loss of data.[8] After being suspended from the Blizzard forums for spamming, we decided that the next best way to receive more participants would be to post the survey on the forums of WoW role-playing guilds. This time, the survey was posted without fear of being banned, and we received the bulk of our usable responses.

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[7] The Role Playing Gamers Association (RPGA) is a free organization owned and operated by Wizards of the Coast (WotC). The group is dedicated to providing organized play opportunities and support for D&D and other WotC RPGs. For more information, see the official RPGA website at: http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=rpga/welcome

[8] Unfortunately, Blizzard Entertainment was no help whatsoever in our endeavor to get more respondents. In fact, when Jason reposted the survey on the role-playing forums to (hopefully) achieve more participants he was banned by the Blizzard forum moderators for spamming. This meant that the original posts were stricken from the forums and he was not allowed to post anything again for thirty-six hours, plus all of the threads he had started were deleted. After receiving notification of this, he appealed our cause by sending them a letter asking that our survey be allowed to be reposted and remain for the sake of research. Unfortunately, we never received a response and this experience only confirmed what previous research indicates (Williams et al. 2006) – that Blizzard does not aid in the research of WoW. Blizzard, and other game publishers, could fundamentally change the face of research about online gaming if they would only aid in such endeavors. Game publishers have access to fantastic tools for research and, should they open up more data and access to scholars, we would likely all benefit from those research findings.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Autoethnography[9]

Jason researched guild websites and scoured the WoW forums until he stumbled upon a guild that not only suited our role-playing interests, but that also went above and beyond the call of average role-playing. This guild, the Ironforge Regiment, attracted our attention by identifying themselves through a player created system on the WoW role-playing forums. This system involves a forum thread where role-playing guilds are asked to post their level of interest and involvement by rating three aspects of WoW game play as either low, moderate, or heavy: role-playing (RP), player versus player combat (PvP), and player versus environmental combat (PvE). In the case of the guild we chose, these ratings were: "heavy RP, heavy PvP, and moderate PvE." This ranking system told us that the Ironforge Regiment was more interested in role-playing and player-versus-player combat than in any other aspects of WoW. These rankings also meant that this guild focused more on inter-player interactions than on leveling.

However, as important as the above information was in factoring into our decision, we choose this particular guild because of a few additional features they included into their guild's role-playing experience. First, the Regiment required a character to be both a dwarf and at least tenth level before they could even request to join. These standards are not unlike some standards that other guilds – no matter the server – might require and are a strong example of how WoW role-players craft narrative space within the bounds of the computer program. However, Ironforge Regiment took things a bit further by requiring all communication within the game – with only a few exceptions – to be in character. This meant that, as a member of this guild, Jason's character had to speak and act like dwarf whenever he played WoW. In broader terms, Ironforge Regiment demanded a level of constant role-play from their members. Having little online role-playing experience prior to this, it is clear to me that Williams et al. (Williams et al. 2006) are not kidding when they state, "[it is] abundantly clear … that people on RP servers are playing another game entirely." There was, and still is, no doubt in our mind that these online gamers take their role-playing very seriously.

However, this behavior is not very different from offline role-players. In our experiences with table-top role-play, a player must make it abundantly clear to the GM when s/he is speaking in or out of character. Often, in our experience, a table-top role-player has some sort of unique accent or diction exclusive to the character, thus allowing a clear distinction between types of communication. In the Ironforge Regiment, Jason's character Gordrum had to speak like a dwarf. This caused him to have to type the phonetic equivalent of dwarven English, which involved misspelling and incorrect grammar. He discovered that quick and effective online communication in dwarven English is extremely difficult until it becomes a learned behavior. He had to practice this aspect of online role-play in order to successfully participate as a member of the guild. As unusual as communicating in online dwarven English may seem it is fundamentally the same as a table-top gamer speaking to his fellow players with dwarven diction while using a dwarven accent. The fact that the members of Ironforge Regiment enforce the use of dwarven English in their online role-play

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demonstrates their devotion to a specific feature of table-top role-play that is otherwise absent in WoW. This example depicts how players seek fulfillment through online role-play in ways previously exclusive to table-top settings.

Jason had two particular experiences within the guild that both represent the intense level of role-playing that takes place within WoW while shedding some light on how role-players within WoW find online role-play fulfilling. The first is the interview he had to participate in to gain entrance into the guild. After meeting the guild's level and race requirements, he tracked down a member of the guild asking how Gordrum could join. It was not until then that he received an invitation to participate in an interview. According to the guild members he spoke with, after this interview – if Gordrum passed – he would gain official entry into the guild. As it turns out, the

[9]Jason's experiences with the Ironforge Regiment were documented through a combination of note-taking and screen captures. For the purposes of our analysis, material within quotation marks are direct quotes substantiated in screen captures and all other material are retellings of Gordrum's experiences in WoW from notes.

purpose of this interview process was to weed through applicants by discovering their role-playing ability and their motives for wanting to join. The personnel officer, Irontoe, told Jason later, after he was accepted, that the guild had instituted the interview as a way to prevent issues they had had in the past. The two primary concerns for the guild were excluding poor role-players and spies from the opposing faction who attempt to track the guild's movements and gain an advantage in PvP. Interviewing became a means by which Ironforge Regiment sought to protect their role-playing environment, likely increasing the fulfillment they received from WoW-based role-play.

The interview was short and focused primarily on Gordrum's motives. The interview process allowed Irontoe to gain some insight into Jason's motivations as a player and his ability to role-play: the two primary concerns of the guild. By concentrating the interview on Gordrum, the interviewer quickly deciphered Jason's online role-playing ability. Irontoe began by asking Gordrum to meet him at Bruuk's, a bar in the military ward of Ironforge – the dwarven capital city. Upon arrival, Irontoe began asking me why Gordrum wanted to join. Having accurately predicted this question Jason responded with a quick fictional background concerning Gordrum's considerably lonely life without his recently deceased wife. But, before he could break the surface of my tale and begin detailing Gordrum's new-found desire to join the war against the Horde, Irontoe began grilling Gordrum on the history of the dwarves in Azeroth[10]. Not being prepared for such unique questions only caused me to type frantically and misspell the words he was already trying to misspell in an attempt to sound like a dwarf through a keyboard. Irontoe then became impatient and jumped on the table and began shouting and calling Gordrum a spy. However, at the same time, the player behind Irontoe sent me a private message asking Jason if everything was okay. Jason responded that it was, but that he was slow at typing dwarven-speak. So, as Irontoe continued shouting at Gordrum, Irontoe's player encouraged Jason, as a player, to continue trying to role-play under pressure. The way in which the interview and the interactions as a whole took place allowed Irontoe's player to better evaluate

my performance with respect to the two foci of the guild: the motivations and role-play ability of applicants.

Jason's second cornerstone experience with Ironforge Regiment was a guild-specific role-play event in which Gordrum participated. The Regiment organizes a "formation and drill" on a semi-regular basis. The purpose of these events is to retain and reward a standard of discipline among the guild members. In order to take part in this event each character had to be "in uniform." In other words, players have to track down a number of specific clothing items that comprised the guild's uniform. The Regiment met at Bruuk's at a designated time. After carousing and drinking in character for a few minutes, members formed up into a straight line and marched out of the city. Along the way, players were instructed to shout company-specific battle cries. Each member of the guild, including recruits, was assigned to one of four companies that had different, individual leaders who provided a level of role-play beyond the average WoW experience. This again demonstrates how online players seek fulfillment by adding elements of table-top role-play to WoW that are not part of the game's original design.

After reaching the city limits we broke formation, ran to another location, and had a player created tournament involving steam tonks[11] that Irontoe handed out. In order to be fully utilized, these tonks require at least one other player simultaneously controlling a tonk in the same area. By having a tournament built on character interaction within the game, we helped amplify the level of role-play we, as players, experienced within WoW. Finally, as the steam tonk tournament wrapped up, we lined up in a horizontal line and prepared for a promotion ceremony. Then, one by one, Irontoe – the official personnel officer – came by and recognized each of us as good guild members and, in turn, promoted those who were deserving of rank. Gordrum was promoted from recruit to private because he met the necessary standards: Gordrum was wearing the prescribed uniform, Jason knew the platoon's battle cry, and Gordrum had now completed an official guild drill. All the while, Jason, as Gordrum's player, had not forsaken any of the role-play standards (e.g. speaking or acting out of

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[10]Azeroth is the fictional world that Blizzard created where the events in the Warcraft saga have taken place. Essentially, it is the world of *Warcraft*.

[11] Steam tonks are a type of player created item built into WoW. They function much like a remote control tank would in real life. They are a fascinating study though because one tonk is worthless without another for it to interact with, forcing social interaction. Additionally, the tonks, when in number, act as a game inside a game – just another interesting aspect of WoW.

character) that Ironforge Regiment had in place. Overall, Jason found it to be quite a fulfilling experience to be a part of a group that independently created a number of ways in which role-playing traditions could be integrated into WoW, making online space more like the table-top spaces that Jason was more familiar with prior to this study.

3.2 Survey[12]

There are three key areas to consider in a review of our data: fulfillment from each kind of role-playing, frequency of each kind of role-playing, and demographic characteristics of the people role-playing.

When asked which form of role-playing people found more fulfilling, either table-top role-playing or role-playing within WoW, the results were split evenly. A third of the respondents choose table-top role-playing, largely because of character interaction. These gamers felt that their characters and their character's actions significantly affected the in-game world more than the world within WoW. According to these respondents, a live person acting as the GM can better react to the spontaneous and often unpredictable actions of the players. One respondent claims, "They [table-top sessions] feel more social and feel more like a cooperative, interactive story." Another feels that WoW impedes his imagination, "I like to have most of my role-play [sic] left up to the imagination, which is often hard in the game of *World of Warcraft*." For the most part, the responses concerning table-top role-playing can be summed up with this respondent's statement: "It varies from session to session and arc to arc. For the most part I honestly prefer tabletop RPGs because there's far more freedom of creativity, it's easier to express actions, I'm more involved in the actual mechanics, and the settings are dynamic."

However, the third that chose role-playing within WoW as being more fulfilling did so mostly because of the visual elements in the game. Many participants referenced how much more engaging the role-playing felt when they could see their character interact within WoW. One respondent claims, "I find it easier and more enjoyable to type out your character's actions and words." Another

claims, "It's good to sit around a table with a few friends and share some fun and snacks, but RP in a virtual environment [sic] can be done at any time and can be more immersive." Overall, the quote from the next respondent bluntly sums up a number of the other responses, "Computer RP for convenience and the obvious visual representation for when my imagination is lazy." Respondents also chose WoW because of the ease of game play. In online role-play, there is no need for one player to run the entire world, instead all the players can play, but at the cost of the game acting as the GM. A final reason to prefer WoW was articulated by a shy respondent, who wrote

Role playing within Wow [is more fulfilling], because my character actually looks like itself, can interact with other characters in a more immersive way, and since I am shy I find the distance a computer interface puts between me and the other person removes some of my inhibitions to speaking or acting.

Beyond the visual advantages of WoW, the ability to refrain from exposing yourself in real life is a clear advantage some role-players realize through playing games online.

The final third of our survey contended that they found both kinds of role-play equally fulfilling, frequently pointing out how the saw benefits in both the convenience of WoW and in the immersiveness of a world that they co-create with their friends around a table.

Looking more closely at the kinds of people who find specific kinds of role-play more fulfilling, two trends stood out. First, location had a strong correlation with fulfillment, as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Location and Role-Playing Fulfillment

	WoW	**TT**	**Both**
Rural	100%	0%	0%
Suburban	40%	60%	0%
Urban	10%	30%	60%

Rural residents exclusively preferred WoW, likely because of the difficulty of getting a table-top

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[12] There were a total of 27 respondents. However, for the purposes of the tables involving fulfillment: we threw out eight responses due to their lack of table-top gaming experience and one for an insufficient response to the question. Similarly, for the tables involving frequency, we threw out the same eight responses for reasons of no table-top experience. However, we left the one other response because although the respondent did not sufficiently answer the fulfillment question, the participant both adequately answered the frequency question and had table-top experience. Finally, for the gender table we threw out one additional response due to a lack of a gender designation from the respondent.

group together offline. In this vein, WoW may offer those who could not role-play offline a venue within which to congregate with likeminded people. Counter to the claims of those who decry online spaces as detracting from offline interactions, rural residents are able to construct common social spaces online that are not available to them offline. The second trend had to do with age.

Table 2. Age and Role-Playing Fulfillment

	WoW	**TT**	**Both**
> 20	50%	25%	25%
21-25	17%	50%	33%
26 <	37.50%	25%	37.50%

In this case, WoW seems to be the preferred outlet for the young, while table-top is preferred by late-college age people. This may have something to do with younger people's lack of exposure to table-top role-playing, more young surveys had to be thrown out because of a lack of table-top experience than any other age group.

When asked which form of role-playing people participated in more frequently, the results heavily favored WoW. Although a handful of people responded that they played both equally (32%), almost twice as many played WoW more often (63%), and only 5% played table-top more often than WoW. Across demographic groups there was a clear preference for WoW, but once again location provided interesting results.

Table 3. Location and Role-Playing Frequency

	WoW	**TT**	**Both**
Rural	100%	0	0
Suburban	80%	20%	0
Urban	45%	0	55%

Although WoW is played most frequently in this table as well, the dominance of the "both" category for urban residents is interesting. The proximity of houses and the ease of meeting other people who role-play, owing to the density of urban populations, gives certain people the opportunity to pursue table-top role-play. As one respondent states:

> "The main reason I play WoW is because it is easier. I have no car to go to the house of people I know who play table top games, and the hours they decide to run those

games make it impossible for me to get there, get back, get home, and take care of my child —I am a single mom."

Effectively, this respondent points out one of the primary advantages to online communication, that when it comes to leisure WoW can be played in doses and likeminded people can be found online much more rapidly than offline. As those interested in role-playing take on additional responsibilities, long periods of leisure time are likely harder to find. This respondent's observation is further illustrated by sorting frequency of play by the age of participants.

Table 4. Age and Role-Playing Frequency

	WoW	**TT**	**Both**
> 20	75%	0	25%
21-25	50%	17%	33%
26 <	67%	0	33%

The young and the oldest members of our survey offer the most distinctive responses, as both groups clearly play WoW more often than they meet a group offline. Although additional responsibilities may help explain why older people play WoW more often, the youngest participants in our survey have not only grown up with high-speed internet connections, but some are in the position where their parents are still needed to help them get from place to place.

The final piece of the survey results is how demographic information beyond age factored into the survey. Matching Yee's findings (Yee 2006) we found that although the stereotype of a young male living in his parent's basement may dominate characterizations of both video game players and role-players, this was not borne out by the survey. 60% of the survey self-identified as male, with 40% female, a difference, but not an overpowering one. Results for fulfillment and gender offered similar trends for both men and women, but sorting by frequency gives an interesting difference between respondents.

Table 5. Gender and Role-Playing Frequency

	WoW	**TT**	**Both**
> 20	73%	0	27%
21-25	43%	14%	43%

Men were far more likely to play WoW more frequently than to play both, while women's role-playing time was evenly split across the board and included the only respondents who role-played offline more often than online. Our survey population also skewed older than one may expect, with 48% claiming to be over 26, 26% from 21-25, and 26% under 20. Finally, it is important to note that our survey population was overwhelmingly white, with 93% of respondents identifying as white or Caucasian. Although the population is largely older than one might expect and more gender balanced, role-playing seems to be an overwhelmingly white hobby.

4. CONCLUSION

Although the sample of the study was small and targeted only toward WoW players with previous table-top experience, the consistency of the results from the survey points to a number of key dynamics about role-playing that supported our autoethnographic analysis, demonstrating the validity and reliability of our observations. The emergence of large-scale online games offers role-players a viable and convenient means by which to role-play. The ease of connection is a huge advantage of online gaming, an advantage that is most clearly realized for those with lives that prevent them from blocking off large amounts of time to meet with people offline. However, the imagination and open-endedness of table-top role-play is a dynamic that is often stifled in WoW. Although the table-top GMing chores of creating and administrating a game world are largely absent from online role-playing, the freedom that comes with having human co-creation of a complete gaming environment is also lost. By performing tasks of the GM, WoW's programming relieves an enormous amount of work from the human GM. Typically, in table-top role-play, the human GM creates and manages an entire populated world filled with people, places, and things. When players permit an online game like WoW to act as the GM it allows them all to participate in the world more leisurely, but at the cost of allowing the game's programming to specify key parts of the world's narrative environment. Players sacrifice the freedom of limitless interaction when they allow a game to GM their world. However, by giving up this control, a group of players can play without the need for one of them to sit aside controlling and adjudicating everything, effectively allowing everyone to enjoy the fruits of the computer program's labors. Online gaming makes role-

playing more viable when people do not know of a table-top group in their immediate area, cannot leave the house to meet with others, or only have small chunks of time to devote to role-play. Location seems to have a strong correlation with frequency of role-playing, as those who live farther away from others are more likely to turn online to role-play. Granted, online role-play requires far more money (internet connection, computer, programs) than table-top, but if the limiting factor for role-playing is time, rather than money, then WoW proves to be a solid option for gamers.

Online games may be able to take a lesson from the table-top and include features that increase the personalization of the world, which was a dominant theme in critiquing WoW for those who preferred table-top role-play. Gamers want to feel like they have an impact on their imaginary world and integrating features that accomplish this may

> **Rural residents exclusively preferred WoW, likely because of the difficulty of getting a table-top group together offline. In this vein, WoW may offer those who could not role-play offline a venue within which to congregate with likeminded people.**

blend some of the table-top advantages into online play. This is the primary issue we also saw when we role-play in WoW. Although online game play offered tremendous advantages, ownership of the role-play in WoW was mitigated because the players are not fully in control of the world. This may be one of the benefits of online gaming, as the online game performs many of the maintenance tasks that would be left up to a person offline, but finding more ways to facilitate player's control in the world may minimize these issues. Table-top groups may need to find ways in which to ease concerns about time and effort in meeting in real-life or it is likely to remain a hobby that is relegated to a kind of gaming performed at a particular time for a particular group of people, rather than as a competitor to online gaming. Moving out of the dorm and having a busier offline world seem to have strong negative impacts on the ability to role-play offline.

Future research on such a topic as role-play should most likely continue to focus on the move to online communication and how it impacts role-playing. It would be interesting to explore these findings on a larger scale or look at whether or not games like

WoW lead to more time role-playing or if time spent playing WoW is mostly time taken away from offline role-playing.

The development of large-scale, immersive online role-playing worlds offers those interested in role-playing an opportunity to easily and quickly find people with whom to role-play. However, online gaming comes with the notable cost of losing complete control of the game world, which increases ease of play, but dramatically decreases feelings of ownership about game play. Both our survey and our ethnographic experience demonstrated the benefits of both kinds of role-play, with online gaming offering convenience that becomes increasingly necessary for those who lead busy lives or who happen to live in areas where they do not have a convenient real-life role-playing group with whom to play.

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