

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The genesis of this thesis comes from a University of Colorado thesis written by Theo Zijderveld (2008). Zijderveld's thesis examined the relationship between World of Warcraft and religion. After examining Zijderveld's thesis, I thought that the idea was compelling but the way Zijderveld approached the subject could be improved.

Zijderveld's thesis was focused on aspects of religion and lore that exist within the game rather than the impact the game has on its players. I felt the focus of the research should be on the players experience and whether or not the player "does" religion in World of Warcraft.

World of Warcraft was chosen as the game to be studied for two major reasons. Firstly, World of Warcraft was the most popular online role-playing game in the United States. Secondly I felt that in order to discuss mechanics and situations that exist in online role-playing games, it would be easier to focus my research on one specific game. World of Warcraft was a convenient game for me to choose because I have experience playing the game myself and would not need to spend time learning the basic mechanics of the game.

Through the literature review it became obvious that certain elements would need to be addressed by the research questions. Elements like community, identity, religious definition, and spiritual experience were important parts of determining the relationship between World of Warcraft and religion. I felt the most appropriate way to answer these

questions would be to interview a sample of players and ask questions that relate to the themes I identified in the literature review. Much of the framework for online-community identification came from writings by Dawson (2004). For religious measurement, I decided to use Durkheim's (1915) framework for religious identification.

The research project that follows provides an interesting look at how religious and community elements function in World of Warcraft in 2011.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Scientific Potential of Video Games and Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds, like World of Warcraft, hold great potential for scientific study. Many social science researchers have utilized virtual worlds in their research. As Vestag (2007) points out, virtual worlds, like World of Warcraft and Everquest 2, allow for detailed observations of human behavior to be collected and examined. Examination of virtual worlds has been deemed research-worthy by several grant-issuing groups, including the National Science Foundation. The variety of virtual world research has been diverse. Some popular studies have examined the relationship between virtual world actions and real world results, including economic and social outcomes (Vestag 2007).

The kinds of scientific research potential that virtual worlds offer does not exist in classical multiplayer games like online poker, chess, or even Modern Warfare 2 (Bainbridge 2007b). Because virtual worlds hold the player more accountable for their actions as a character, players have a vested interest in building relationships and presenting a complimentary version of themselves. Committed players invest time and money in hopes of social or spiritual rewards. Virtual worlds are excellent virtual laboratories; the worlds provide environments, cultures, experiences and participants. Virtual worlds are often used to research issues like gender interactions, socioeconomic

differences, or moral decisions (Bainbridge 2007a), but virtual worlds are less likely to be used to determine if the worlds themselves are creating new phenomenon instead of mirroring or explaining known phenomena. Further research is necessary to determine if virtual worlds create their own experiences that do not mirror identified social phenomena.

Social research into video games uses methodology, including content analysis, language processing, participant observation and online interviewing. Through these techniques there is a growing consensus that online games and situations may be one of the most appropriate ways to understand human behavior as highlighted by Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007). There is a shift of focus in studies of video games and online interaction away from examining if video games are harmful to children, and towards studies that examine if we can better understand the real world through the virtual world (Bainbridge and Bainbridge 2007). My thesis represents a further shift in which the virtual world itself may create experiences that are real to both the game and the individual.

This thesis is both a response and clarification of a master's thesis written by Theo Zijderfeld at the University of Colorado in 2008. The purpose of Zijderfeld's (2008) thesis was to present the argument that new age religious experiences are created and maintained in online gaming. Zijderfeld's thesis focused on players' experiences in World of Warcraft and Second Life. Zijderfeld utilizes sociological, psychological, anthropological, philosophical, historical and theological perspectives to build a framework for examining religious experiences in online gaming. Through the idea of the "cyber pilgrim" as a player who travels "cyberspace" in search of meaning,

Zijderveld examines creation of self-identity through these virtual travels but offers little evidence for whether these travelers themselves create their experiences or merely experience them.

According to Graham and Warf (2009) video games occupy virtual spaces of activity. These video games, or virtual games, constitute a new world that is an alternative to the real world inhabited by humans (Gunkel and Gunkel 2009). Gunkel and Gunkel (2009) point out that terms such as “new frontier” and “new world” are often used to describe “The Internet” and specific places individuals can utilize on the Internet. Metaphors like “new world” and “new frontier” instill visions of an unexplored land ready for colonization, but unlike the western frontier in the United States, the possibilities that this “new frontier” holds may represent much more than new wildlife and new places for cities (Gunkel and Gunkel 2009).

Video games were initially developed as training devices for pilots, and have grown to become a permanent part of the global culture (Schrader and McCreery 2008). Not only are video games a part of the global culture but, according to Graham and Warf (2009), video games represent a vast and growing global market. Although the usage of video games is concentrated in industrialized countries, there are video game players in every corner of the globe. The stereotype of the teenage video game player, sitting around with a group of friends, is not representative of reality. In fact, in the United States over 67 percent of the heads of households play video games on a regular basis (Graham and Warf 2009). The usual video game player is over 18 years of age and averages 35 years of age (Padilla-Walker et al. 2010; Graham and Warf 2009).

The video games these adults are currently playing are far different from the two dimensional linear video games of the past. New games, called massively multiplayer online role playing games, or MMORPGs, take the player into the heart of the action. Players of online role playing games are free to design their characters to appear as they wish. The characters that players create exist in a changing, three dimensional world. An online role playing game is played through the eyes of the created character. The created character is often referred to as the player's avatar. The term "avatar" connotes the player's visual representation of the character the player created. The player's avatar is the vehicle through which the player experiences the virtual world. The virtual world becomes the real world for this player emotionally, although temporarily (Graham and Warf 2009).

The amount of exposure and potential profit in virtual games has not been lost on corporate America. Brand placement and advertising take place in the virtual world just as in the real world. Players with a feeling of immersion in the virtual world often translate this to real-life purchases of products seen in the virtual world (Graham and Warf 2009). Some players choose to purchase an item such as a weapon or armor piece from another player with real currency (Humphreys 2008). Because the purchase of in-game goods often violates the rules of the game, businesses have been created to allow players to buy and sell virtual goods.

The buying and selling of goods within these virtual worlds has created economies that rival economies of the real world. The virtual world of *Everquest* has a GNP per capita of \$2,266. This makes *Everquest* comparable to the 77<sup>th</sup> richest nation in the world in terms of total wealth (Graham and Warf 2009). Because a market exists for

these virtual goods, several businesses employ individuals to earn virtual currency for resale. Many of these workers are in third world countries and work in an environment very similar to a sweatshop. For them, video gaming is not entertainment but rather the job of the day. The items that these players earn through their play are then sold for real world money on various websites. This “business” can be very profitable for the employer. Because game developers view these businesses as cheating, there are no hard statistics for the amount that is made using workers (Nakamura 2009).

### Video Game Effects on the Individual

Video games have become increasingly popular among college-aged individuals. The leisure time of college students is often dominated by video games and Internet usage (Bainbridge 2007b). Evidence suggests that the amount of video game and Internet use may not drop off as adult roles are assumed (Padilla-Walker et al. 2010). The average 35-year-old video game player most likely began playing video games in college and has continued to play into adulthood. Continued video game playing may contribute negatively to the development of social skills and quality of relationships from adolescence into adulthood (Padilla-Walker et al. 2010).

Video games can have a greater impact on social behavior than television. In a study done by Greitemeyer and Osswald (2010), participants in a video game study watched different types of video games: prosocial, neutral, and antisocial. The groups playing the prosocial video games were more likely to engage in helpful behavior in real life than those playing either the neutral or the antisocial video games. Players of the prosocial games were more likely to assist the testers and to volunteer to participate in

additional studies than the players in the other two groups. Playing video games with prosocial content was positively related to prosocial behavior. Many video game players play virtual reality games for the social connections, both good and bad, that are made within the virtual world. Video games are replacing the social networks of past generations and offer players a chance to socialize with other players from around the globe. While it may be impossible to directly correlate video game play and negative or positive behavior, the studies mentioned earlier make it clear that video games matter to the individual.

Video game players often find virtual worlds to be a space where they can be free of real life with its rules and regulations. Existing in the virtual world emancipates the player from the stress of the real world. Gamers are likely to separate themselves from the real world while playing video games (Golub 2010). Because gamers become accustomed to these virtual worlds and the freedom and control they feel in these worlds, gamers often play more than one game or move from game to game. Members of new virtual worlds are often players from other virtual worlds (Tschang and Comas 2010).

Humans are social creatures that have a need for group belonging. Multi-player video game playing can help the gamer satisfy the desire to connect with others. Role-playing games are especially useful in helping people feel as if they belong to a social group or network. The social network that exists within a game is often rewarding for the player, and it is one incentive for the player to continue playing the game (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2010). According to Demski (2009), friendship networks that exist on the Internet may be just as rewarding to the player as friendship networks in the real world. In many ways social networking through the virtual world is better and easier

than in the real world. On the Internet, the individual controls the amount of socializing done. The use of avatars as representations of the game player removes barriers of traditional networking such as race, gender or physical appearance. In online role playing games, avatars are created by the player in any form or shape the game allows and the player can imagine. These avatars are often glorified versions of human beings or fantasy-based characters that allow players to present themselves in a specific way (Demski 2009). Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer (2009) suggest that the information on the characters is presented in the game in biographical form in order to allow players to create avatars that are physically desirable but also mentally interesting to other players. Because the game is seen through the eyes of the character rather than through the eyes of the player, some gamers choose to immerse themselves in the virtual world and essentially pretend to become their avatar. The social connections and avatar representations in the virtual world can create a bond between the player and the character which increases the merger between the real self and the virtual self. Social lessons learned in the virtual world may translate to social actions in the real world (Rak 2009). The players' transition back and forth between the virtual world and the real world can create an even stronger merger between the virtual self and the actual self (Rak 2009).

Virtual worlds are often played to meet the social needs of the player. These social needs cannot be met without other players. Other players are introduced through their avatars in the virtual world and not in reality. Players become socialized to the virtual world through witnessing other players act and acting themselves. The role playing game players may be several miles apart or on different sides of the globe while

interacting with each other. During these interactions and through the creation of the virtual self, users have an opportunity to create fantasies and live out fantasy lives (Tschang and Comas 2010). The players that create their own fantasies are more likely to continue playing and take role-playing games seriously. The player's fantasy is often a representation of unrealized desires. Role-playing games that allow players to engage in their own fantasies are more likely to maintain a large number of players (Tschang and Comas 2010).

The virtual presence of the character in the video game environment affects the human experience. Some features of virtual worlds help to produce the sense of a physical presence (Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer 2009; Takatalo, Nyman and Laaksonen 2008). The stimulating interaction, experienced through the character can explain why some players lose track of time while in the virtual world. The virtual world is a created world, and events happen with a much higher frequency than in the real world. Therefore, the concept of time becomes distorted. In addition, players experience feelings of escape through immersion in the virtual world. This escapism may also lead to losing awareness of how much time has been spent in the virtual world in real time (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2010).

King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths (2010) explore a comparison of the similar addictive properties of video games and gambling. The authors found many similar structural characteristics that influence gambling frequency and video gaming in the virtual world. Addiction to video games closely resembles gambling, according to their research. There are social interactions in gambling and in gaming. Both the player and the gambler control and manipulate the features of the game being played. They both identify

with the game being played, whether a slot machine in the real world or a virtual world in an online role playing game. Both gambling games and video games have presentation features which attract the player and keep them coming back. Finally, both video games and gambling offer reward and punishment features. A gambler will keep playing waiting for that big jackpot that is hoped to be just around the corner. The virtual world player will continue playing to gain more points or to advance the character in some way. The player and the gambler are both looking for the next level and it is always just around the corner. The primary feature of gambling and video game addiction is the lack of control. Both players are continuously working for the next level and do not know how to stop. This is another negative side of gaming.

Video games can be considered positive or negative based on how the player responds to the game. The gamer who plays for relaxation and entertainment, and enjoys a few hours of gaming before turning in for the night, probably has a positive experience with video games. Others may view the gamer who plays every spare minute and is hesitant to leave the game for fear of missing something as having a negative experience, as well as the person who is playing the game for a paycheck and receives few of the rewards. Video games as a new technology will require more in-depth study to determine if the overall effect is negative or positive. Video game research is research worth undertaking as video games are here to stay and have become a prominent part of our culture.

#### New Opportunities of Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds represent new opportunities for video game players. Virtual worlds are new worlds that have never been explored. Virtual worlds offer virtual pioneers the

opportunity to discover and create a new experience. These types of worlds offer an escape from the restriction of the real world and foster new experiences to replace experiences that have been tried or no longer exist. Virtual worlds may be the “new frontier” for the modern generation. The idea of a “new world” can be seductive to the player. The virtual world is the player’s area to do with as they please. The player can choose to build, exploit, and explore. The gamer may feel like a pilgrim traveling to a land that has not been settled to establish his own colony and set up a new territory. This “new frontier” or “new world” idea has a powerful impact on the explorer of this new world, the cyber-world (Meyers 2009; Gunkel and Gunkel 2009).

Plural, alternative worlds exist in cyberspace. Exploring these worlds, and playing virtual games in them, can blur the distinction between the real world and the imagined world (Graham and Warf 2009). It may be possible to create a more perfect society that exists beside the real society and fosters the creation of meaningful relationships and experiences that many individuals consider “better” than those that exist in the real world (Gunkel and Gunkel 2009).

The better society that game players search for includes escaping the realities of everyday life. The real enjoyment for the gamer is that moment between the virtual world and the real world. Players can exist outside of themselves in this moment. This is the utopian location: the thrill of the virtual world with none of the risk of the real world. According to Graham and Warf (2009), this experience of control and possibility is referred to as premeditated adrenaline. The expectation of control and the sense of progress help ensure a gamer’s return to these virtual worlds.

Video game players have been known to become so immersed in the video game that what happens on the screen and what happens to the body begin to combine in a type of synergy (Graham and Warf 2009). There is a line between the real world and the virtual world, and immersion in one requires ignorance of the other. It is possible to create a world in which only the minimum amount of biological attention is paid to the human body, and the emotional life is led in the virtual world. It does not take much to support a human body to allow the user to “live” in virtual reality. Castronova (2007), quoted in Golub (2010), envisions a time when people will live their normal daily life in virtual reality and this will change the social climate of the world. One big emotional advantage to a virtual world existence is that in the virtual world death is not a reality, while in the real world death is inescapable. This lack of death enables the user to start over from the last saved location and erase mistakes or replay the game in a different manner.

Players in virtual worlds are not mere observers but are actively participating in the story (Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer 2009). According to Fineman, Maitlis, and Panteli (2007) these worlds, while virtual worlds and not reality, are not emotionally free environments. The emotional properties that are integrated into the game help to give meaning to the experiences of the player. This emotional integration enhances the quality and intensity of the game for the player as well as provides creative opportunities for the player. The player can experience feelings in a new way or for the first time. These novel emotions can be tried out and experimented with. Experiences that would not be possible in the real world can be played out in the virtual world. Few people in the real world have the opportunity to settle a new land and take it from the current occupier. However, in

many video games this is not only possible but the point of the game. An advantage to taking the land from the current owner in a video game, in contrast to the real world, is that no one is physically harmed. The characters that are placed in the virtual worlds are electronic images and suffer no harm when they are “killed” and their domain is taken over by another. In the instance when the battle is between two real-world players carried out in the virtual world, the killing of one player’s avatar does not kill that player nor does it take the player’s home. The killing of the avatar causes the owner of the avatar to reset the game and try again, as many times as necessary to achieve the goal set out by the player.

The lack of death in the virtual world and the novel emotions players can experience are major factors in the popularity of virtual worlds. In addition, according to Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer (2009), the act of responding to the characters within the virtual world creates enjoyment. Players operate with real identities that have been transferred from the physical world to the virtual world. These two identities, virtual and real, can operate in both worlds through the player. Real identities become virtual identities and the virtual identity is translated to the real identity (Rak 2009). The players may begin to imagine themselves as the avatar and the properties of the avatar become integrated into the users’ self-perception (Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer 2009). The social identity of the user becomes intertwined in both the physical world of the user and the virtual world. Social needs can then be met through virtual game worlds, even if those needs are not being met through real world interactions.

### World of Warcraft – The Game

World of Warcraft is a complex online role playing game created and operated by Blizzard Entertainment, a subsidiary of Activision Blizzard. World of Warcraft was released in November of 2004 and it has since become the largest and most successful online role-playing game in terms of number of subscribers, revenue, and sales (Hachman 2010). World of Warcraft is the fourth Blizzard game set in the “Warcraft” universe. As of 2008, it boasts over 12 million subscribers (Hachman 2010) who pay a monthly subscription fee of around 15 dollars a month. Since World of Warcraft’s launch there have been three “expansions” to the game that have added new content and new playable characters and races. The first expansion was “The Burning Crusade” in 2007, and the second was “Wrath of the Lich King” in 2008. The third expansion, “Cataclysm,” was released in December of 2010 and dramatically changed the virtual landscape to reflect large areas of destruction caused by a dragon. There are many other online role-playing games in existence, but World of Warcraft is by far the most popular traditional online role-playing game in the United States. In order to play World of Warcraft, the player is required to have an internet-connected PC or Mac computer that is capable of running the software as well as an active battle.net account that allows the subscriber to log in to the game world. Subscriptions can be paid by credit card or game cards sold at various retail locations.

World of Warcraft is a game that almost never shuts off. Game servers are open and available for play 24 hours a day. As long as the servers are not down for maintenance, or something is broken, then the game is being played by someone and the experience that is World of Warcraft continues. World of Warcraft is constantly

changing in the sense that the developers are consistently adding content, making changes to characters, and creating more things to see and do in the virtual world.

The first time a player logs into the game, he or she is faced with a decision of what server to play on. Because so many people want to play World of Warcraft, Blizzard has developed many servers that allow players to participate in the same game but with different people on every server. The same rules, non-player characters, and environments exist on these different servers; however, the player characters that populate the worlds will be different people server to server. There are also different game rules that exist on a small number of servers that emphasize role playing or player versus player play-styles. There are approximately 250 different servers, each capable of allowing around 4000 people at a given time to play the game (Blizzard Entertainment 2011). Servers are separated by geography to make connections to the servers more stable and allow people from various locations on the globe to play more reliably. Servers are color coded by population to represent how “full” a given server is. Red servers have a high volume of players whereas green servers are relatively low-population servers. Occasionally servers are marked as “full” when character creation is no longer allowed due to overcrowded conditions.

There are also three “game type” servers that players must choose from. These game types are based on rule sets that attempt to cater towards specific player needs and wants. The three types of servers are “normal” (servers with no changes to the game rules), “player versus player” (servers where combat between players is more common and should be expected), and “role-playing” (servers where players should expect other players to participate more actively in role-playing activities such as character specific

speech and actions). In some ways it may seem that role-playing servers in a role-playing game would be redundant, but the reason for the existence of role-playing servers is to accommodate those players who tend to take their role-playing more seriously. Blizzard enforces very few rules regarding play style; however, it does enforce a strict “no player harassment” policy that stipulates that players are not allowed to negatively interfere with another player’s game activity.

The next decision a player is faced with is choosing an avatar to represent himself or herself in the game. There are two factions in World of Warcraft: Alliance and Horde. The factions cannot communicate with each other in the game except for gestures built into the game. Players must choose a faction for the character they create, and each faction contains the possible races a player may choose for the player’s avatar. Alliance character races include Humans, Gnomes, Dwarves, Night Elves, Draenei, and Worgan. Horde character races are Orcs, Tauren, Undead, Goblin, Blood Elves, and Trolls. A player’s faction determines player versus player fighting teams as well as race and class combinations. During the character creation period a player must also choose a class that determines the abilities of the avatar during the game. There are 10 possible classes that are limited by the player’s race and faction choice. The classes are typically broken down into three main types. There are fighter types, responsible for taking most of the damage dealt by enemies. These types include Warrior, Paladin, and Death Knight. There are healer types, which are responsible for keeping the party alive. Healers include Priest, Shaman, and Druid. The rest of the classes are dedicated to dealing damage to enemies. The damage-dealing classes are Hunters, Mages, Warlocks, and Rogues. Depending on the desired play style of the player and how they choose to build their

characters, they may find themselves in class roles other than those listed above. Players are limited to ten characters per server and fifty characters on all servers. Players are allowed to operate characters from different factions on the same server.

When a character is created and enters the game, the character is placed in a starting area that is based on the racial choice they made at creation. Some races share a common starting area but most races have their own. As soon as a new character is created the player is exposed to the stories and cultural heritage of their race based on the previous Warcraft games. Almost immediately, players are tasked with helping various non-player characters with certain jobs and tasks that reveal more lore and story about the game world. The game world itself has its own geography that includes places similar to destinations you might find in the real world and other places like nothing the player has ever seen. Major cities exist as well as small towns. A player will find barren plains and lush jungles as well as icy tundra. Non-player entities are also present, and they number in the hundreds to thousands of creatures controlled by computer programs to do specific tasks or behave in specific ways. Non-player creatures range in style from the mundane skunk or squirrel all the way to a representation of a two-headed dog made of lava and several types of dragons. Creatures are not limited to animal forms and often represent humans or human-like creatures and can be from completely friendly to entirely hostile.

World of Warcraft is designed like a “Dungeons and Dragons” game where players advance in levels by killing enemies and completing quests and tasks to gain experience points. Player characters start at level 1 and can advance as high as level 85. A player’s level is a representation of how strong that character is against enemies of

similar levels. Every player advances levels at different real-time speeds. Character advancement is generally based on how many hours a player spends playing the game, how skilled a player is, and how well a player knows the geography of the game world. It would typically take several months for a player to reach the maximum level on their first character, at which point the goal of the game for most players switches from gaining experience and leveling to obtaining better pieces of armor and weapons. Players of maximum level are often considered to be in the “end game” stage of the game, although the term “end game” is a bit misleading, as World of Warcraft has no end.

Players may also participate in the economy of a server by buying and selling goods they collect from killing enemies. Many players also utilize trade skills like mining or blacksmithing which allow players to craft and collect items that others may desire to better their character in terms of equipment. Any player character can choose up to two trade skills to learn, and advancing a trade skill is similar to advancing in levels in the sense that the player can create higher level items with a higher skill in that trade skill. World of Warcraft uses an auction system where players set their price levels and other players are given the option to buy those goods. Auction houses are located in every major city in the game world.

While it is possible to advance to the maximum levels playing alone, the game takes on a new dimension when it is played with other player characters. Players with similar desires often band together in “guilds,” which are collections of players that work together to achieve common goals like advancing in leveling or defeating particularly hard enemies. There are no level restrictions on joining a guild, but specific guilds may have their own qualifications which can include anything from level, race or desired

goals in the game. It is difficult to progress towards “end game” goals without the aid of a guild because of monsters that drop armor, and weapon upgrades typically take ten or twenty-five players working together to defeat. Most players spend the majority of their gaming time in the end game, and this is when most player inter-relationships are formed and strengthened or broken and lost.

### Religion on the Internet

The Internet is changing how Americans live their lives. Internet usage has been increasing since the mid 1990s, and the Internet is now a vital tool for communication, entertainment and education (Wellman and Haythornwaite 2002). Things that we used to have to go to many different physical locations for now exist in one place. The introduction of the Internet into our daily lives has had an effect on how widely religion is practiced in the traditional sense. Researchers have taken notice of these changes and have begun to document how the Internet has changed both traditional views of religion and how religion operates on the Internet.

The most obvious change that occurs is the shift from religious congregations in a physical location to meetings and gatherings that occur in a virtual space. The transition from physical to virtual tends to remove credibility from established religion and lends credibility to newer and more experimental forms of religious practice (Beaudoin 1998). This shift occurs because the individual, who physically travels to a destination to practice religion, already has an interest in finding meaning in the ceremonies because the individual has committed time and energy simply to arrive at the destination. The virtual traveler on the other hand is merely clicks away from experiencing the ideas of a myriad

of possible religious lessons. The sheer number of religious groups and identifications on the Internet may lead the individual to be open to spiritual experimentation (Beaudoin 1998).

Traditional religious groups have attempted to promote their presence online and have had some success within their own already established groups (Helland 2004). For individuals who do not identify with traditionally established religious groups, picking and choosing the religious beliefs that best suit their own needs is more common (Helland 2004). These “choose your belief” scenarios are possible for many reasons, but the most important factor is exposure. The individual can choose to expose themselves to many different religious beliefs and may find things they like and dislike in several spiritual communities. One of the most prominent features of the Internet is the ability to express your religious opinions so that others may read and agree or disagree. Like-minded individuals tend to find each other online and form their own small spiritual communities. These spiritual communities may exist as explicitly religious endeavors or may resemble something else completely (O’Leary and Brasher 1996).

### Identity

Individuals construct their identities based on who they believe themselves to be and how they are different from others, while also reinforcing how they are similar to other people (Hewitt 2000). People build and destroy aspects of their identity every day through the lived and imagined experiences of the individual. A key factor in identity construction is how you imagine people perceive you and the sorts of reactions you receive from others (Hewitt 2000). Both the presentation of a perceived identity and the

reaction to one's actions constantly shape and reshape an individual's identity. In a social situation, a person's location in the social spectrum is known as the individual's achieved social status (Hewitt 2000).

One of the most common social institutions that helps to form individual and social identities is the religious or spiritual institution. Religious teachings offer common stories, experiences and explanations that encourage discussion and investigation by members of the community (Ammerman 2003). These common stories are not unlike telling of patriotic legends or a mythos created by a video game that bring individuals together for a common cause.

The oftentimes anonymous nature of the online world allows individuals to craft social identities they could not normally craft in the physical world. In a virtual world, players are not limited by their actual gender or skin color and may choose to identify themselves in any manner they wish. Because of the internet's relative anonymity, the individual can easily re-create an online identity. Researchers have noticed that the freedom of re-creation of identity liberates individuals from real-world physical identity construction constraints such as race, handicap, and gender (Turkle 1995). Further studies on the subject of online identity construction have shown that online identities are still structured by offline experiences and power structures (Kendall 1999). Because of these inconsistencies, any attempt to determine why people identify themselves in a certain manner must be careful to explain the context of the situation.

### Community

The most important aspect of religious experience is ultimately community. The legitimacy of any religious or spiritual system relies on the fact that there will be a community of some sort in which members support each other during times of distress (Dawson 2004). Sacred items would lose any mythical relevance without the community there to believe the sacred items are special or magical. Researchers must be particularly careful when attempting to define what a community is in the virtual sense (Dawson 2004). Dawson clarifies two problems that researchers have when thinking about online communities and religion. The first problem is that people tend to have a romantic notion of communities that are small and tight-knit. Dawson emphasizes that researchers must keep in mind that the social structures present in the modern age are not related to idealistic visions of the past. The second problem is that Western religious thought is centered on large, congregation-type churches. Mega churches that cater to hundreds or thousands may not represent community in the sociological sense (Dawson 2004). For this discussion, it may be helpful to think of religious communities as “social networks” rather than physical places with physical people.

Community in a virtual sense looks very different from community in a physical sense. Both types of community have individual members with individual motivations, but virtual communities are limited by the types of communication available to the members. Communication in most virtual communities is usually text-based (Dawson 2004). Other forms of communication include audio and video communication. Audio and video communication are becoming more popular at this time, however the majority of online communication is still text-based. In terms of the virtual community World of

Warcraft, the individual players represent themselves through not only text, but actions carried out by an avatar. Still, what is left out of the World of Warcraft community scenario is any focus on race, ethnicity or gender that the player does not wish to disclose. The ability to hide undesired personality traits is recognized as one of the greatest appeals of online communication (Markham 1998). Because so much is unknown about the members of a virtual community, the individual member may be less likely to focus on or recognize undesirable traits in the other members.

Researchers have proposed some useful “rules” to determine if a virtual community should be termed a community. Dawson (2004) proposes six elements that must be found for a group to be termed a community. The six elements are interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, social control, personal concern, and utilization of a public space. Interactivity in World of Warcraft may be measured by how much interaction an individual player has with other players. Stability of membership would be measured by guild or group participation. Stability of identity can be measured by the number of alternate characters an individual has and if others know the character is an alternate. The amount of social control can be determined by learning if the guild or group has a method of punishment for various behaviors. The element of personal concern can be measured by learning if group members have ever comforted other players or been comforted by other players in some form. World of Warcraft is a public place, open to anyone willing to pay the monthly subscription fee and abide by the game rules.

### New Religions and the Internet

The idea of a religion existing on the Internet was brought to public attention in 1997 when it was revealed that the Heaven's Gate cult maintained a recruiting and informational presence on the World Wide Web (Dawson and Hennebery 2004). At the time, mainstream religious institutions had not fully realized the influence of the Internet and stereotypes existed that claimed the Internet was the domain of cult groups, corporations and nerds. From then to now the Internet has gained much legitimacy to the average person and given rise to the idea that there may be new religious movements (NRM) on the Internet (Dawson and Hennebery 2004). The Heaven's Gate religious movement was relatively low-tech in the sense that it still relied on face to face interactions and used the Internet primarily for email communication and general information. Heaven's Gate did represent the popular template for NRM's at the time, which was to build a website and hope to drive web traffic to your site to spread your message. The hope of NRM's at the time was that individuals would become interested and request more information to be delivered in a conventional manner. Stereotypes existed that claimed the most likely candidate for a NRM would be a young, naive loner. However, the reality was that all types of people were susceptible to the influence of a NRM (Dawson and Hennebery 2004).

While cults and religions still maintain a large presence on the Internet, what is becoming more significant in recent years is the idea that the Internet itself is a new environment capable of spawning its own unique NRM's (Dawson and Hennebery 2004). It has been suggested that the Internet has created new space-worlds and time-worlds that have never existed in human history, and the consequences of these worlds are largely

unknown (Holmes 1997). Just as creations like theme parks, shopping malls, and automobiles have created a new human habitat, the Internet exists as a real place and shapes the conditions of social life (Holmes 1997). There can be little doubt that the Internet will have an effect on NRM's.

### World of Warcraft's Potential for New Religious Movements

While the Internet itself is quite unregulated, allowing ideas to pass between people without censor, World of Warcraft does not exist without rules and regulations. World of Warcraft is maintained and overseen by the Blizzard corporation. The corporation maintains complete control over its game, from creating all the non-player characters and environments to establishing a set of rules that can result in players being permanently banned from the game. Any NRM that may develop out of a corporate game like World of Warcraft will exist within the rules that the corporation sets. Activision/Blizzard walks a careful line between allowing the players to do whatever they desire and maintaining the structure and integrity of the game itself.

It is very unlikely that the creators of World of Warcraft created the game in order to foster NRMs. World of Warcraft was not the first online role-playing game, and it borrowed much of its game play mechanics from various other role-playing games. The game play features that creators included in the game and what the creators did not include in the game had a direct effect on the success of the game as well as any potential for NRM's.

The creators put a strong emphasis on customization in World of Warcraft. There are several ways in which players customize their online appearance and begin from day

one to create a unique individual character. A character must first have its own name which is unique to the realm the character is created on. If a player desires a name that is already taken, the player will be forced to choose a new name. A player must also determine the race, class, and facial appearance of the character. This allows players dozens of ways to create their own character's identity. Pets, mounts, weapons and armor allow further customization of a character.

The concept of identity is legitimized by the other players of the game immediately; the other players must use your created name to contact you in game. In World of Warcraft the player must select a fantasy-based race for the player's avatar. The racial choices in World of Warcraft bear little resemblance to real world racial properties. These races are separated into factions by the games creators, and based on a player's avatar's race selection; certain players of other races will not be allowed to communicate with opposing faction characters at all thus instantly reinforcing the player's identity as a certain race. The game itself allows a player to determine what kind of player they wish to be, and based on the actions a player takes in the game, other players will respond positively or negatively. The game itself has factions of non-player characters that are not real individuals but fulfill vital virtual world functions like buying and selling goods. These non-player characters will approve and disapprove of the actions you undertake in game and will either reward your character or attempt to kill your character.

World of Warcraft is a game that can technically be played without interacting with anyone else. The downside to avoiding interaction is that your character will be very limited in the amount of game-content that can be explored and limited in access to

the better weapons and armor found in the game. World of Warcraft does a lot to foster community interaction from the very beginning. When a player first creates a character, he or she has instant access to the in game chat feature. Every player is equipped with a text-chat communication window and the player's chat communication window scrolls messages from other players at a consistent rate. Players who wish to participate in the text conversation are not limited. A player's character progresses through the game by killing in-game monsters for loot drops and experience points as well as completing quests for various non-player characters. Character progression is measured by the "level" of the character. Pairing up with another character is encouraged very early in the game through quests that take more than one person to complete. This pairing up is referred to as grouping. Groups support as few as two players to as many as five players and bonuses are given to groups of larger size. Meeting other characters is also a vital source of information about other locations in the game world.

Eventually most characters reach the maximum level when it becomes impossible to progress a character without joining what is called a guild. World of Warcraft has no limit on the number of players allowed to join a guild. The larger the guild the more complicated the social structure becomes. Guilds can range from two total players to thousands. It is within these guilds that a person would expect to find most aspects of community. When a player joins a guild, the player is given access to a chat channel that only other guild members can see, and this channel is often where guild events are planned and discussed. By reading guild chat a player begins to learn a lot of information about the other people in the guild as well as the types of behaviors that are supported or discouraged by the guild. Guilds often have their own websites with forums for

communication and guild rules for guidance. Guilds are maintained by an individual or group of individuals and the leaders have the power to remove any member from the guild that does not follow their rules or any other reason the leader chooses. If a player is interested in staying with a guild it is advisable to conform to the norms of the guild. Interaction between individuals in the guild is often rewarding to the members of the guild in the form of help for completing quests or other goals.

If there are NRMs in World of Warcraft it is unlikely that the individuals would represent themselves as being in a religious movement. What is much more likely is that NRMs are developing in World of Warcraft's virtual communities in a spontaneous manner. This is a stark contrast to how religious movements have developed in recent history on the Internet. It is unknown how religious or spiritual experience is developing in World of Warcraft.

### Classical Religious Theory

One of the first areas of concern for sociologists was religion and religious experience. Durkheim spent much of his time and effort attempting to promote the scientific study of religion as the correct way to view religion and religious experience. Durkheim believed that all parts of society, even unpleasant parts, work together in order to create a stable and functional society. Durkheim believed that all people who live in a society together will create forms of religion and thus build cohesion and dedication to the preservation of society. Durkheim (1915) believed there were five elementary forms of religious life and each form is present in all societies.

The first observable measure of religious life is that a division exists between sacred and profane objects. Durkheim contends that there must be some separation

between objects that are “special” to society and carry meanings beyond their simple purpose. Sacred objects can be anything from a particular item, clothing, or a phrase or idea. Widely known sacred objects would include the Christian cross or the Jewish Star of David. A person who has never encountered our culture sees these objects as what they physically are with no special meaning. Durkheim contends that it is society itself that gives these types of objects meaning and that when a society agrees upon the sacred meaning of objects then stability and belief in society are strengthened.

Durkheim’s second observable measure is the belief in the supernatural. This measure is somewhat confusing because Durkheim does not require religious believers to believe in ghosts or spirits but in the possibility of their existence. What is easier to understand is that all religions contain mythical creatures that do mythical things or promote spiritual ideas that help humans answer questions they have about mortality and the nature of the world. Durkheim believed the individual may believe in supernatural aspects of the universe or supernatural aspects of a tribal leader. The most common example of this in American society would be belief in God as creator of all things. Durkheim did not require specific religions to believe in a god or gods in order to be classified a religion. Durkheim noted that a religion like Buddhism is a religion because the believers worship the idea of the “four noble truths” as another culture might worship a god.

The third measure that Durkheim recognizes is the belief in divinity, either national or international. Durkheim believed that individuals must have a sense of origin for their divine beings. Nationality or internationality refers to spiritual figures locally recognized like a popular tribe leader, or international originating figures like the

Christian God. Here Durkheim is deconstructing how society answers questions that have no obvious answer. For example, in more primitive societies rainbows might be explained as being put there by a god that is in charge of a particular place or even the entire universe. Religious beliefs help explain events on a local or international level. Religious beliefs might help explain why an individual's crops grow so well while other countries suffer flooding or drought. Durkheim is suggesting divinity is something bigger and more important than the individual. In this way, even science can be explained as divine because it provides answers to questions that a human is not born with knowledge of. Science as religion also exists nationally and internationally with different cultures believing in some ways differently.

Durkheim's fourth religious measure is the "negative cult." Durkheim believes that one of religion's functions is to inhibit the socially harmful motivations of the individual. Thus the negative cult includes activities and behaviors that increase a society's instability and make those actions unacceptable for the religion and thus society. Durkheim believes that if the society values certain objects and ideas, socialization would more easily promote activities that support the positive cult and inhibit the negative cult. Some examples of the negative cult would be a negative opinion of sex outside of marriage and giving up certain unhealthy items for Lent.

Durkheim's fifth and final measure of religious life is that of ritual. Durkheim believed that religions must contain rituals that are clear and known to all participants. These rituals should not be secret to the members of the religion, and the rituals serve purposes beyond the acts themselves. The rituals are most successful when many people attend. The rituals help build a sense of community and set goals for members who have

not yet completed certain rituals or tasks. While they may or may not be difficult to complete, Durkheim believed that society's acknowledgement of their importance was essential. Examples of rituals include communion, rites of passage, and funerals.

Equally important to this paper is what Durkheim said religion was not. According to Durkheim religion is not shamanism, animism or hallucination. Durkheim believed that religions exist to enable four types of functions: discipline, bonding, refreshment, and happiness. Durkheim considered belief systems like shamanism, animism and hallucination to be too individually based and incapable of inspiring the religious functions of a more communally based religion. Durkheim's functionalism depicts religion as vital to the stability of a society.

Marx and Weber presented views of religion that are also worth describing because many contemporary religious theories are based on the ideas of those early social thinkers. Marx and Engels' work was originally printed in 1843. Marx and Engels (1975) were primarily interested in how the economies of the world function and saw all social problems as inherently economically based. Marx and Engels believed that religious belief was essentially economically based. Marx felt that poorer people would become more complacent in their surroundings if they believed they would find eternal salvation at the end of their life. Marx saw religion as a tool the upper classes had been using for thousands of years to suppress the lower classes. The economic foundation of religion is important to this paper because the theory suggests a relationship between religion and exchange. Economic class division explanations like Marx's religious theory are the basis for sociological conflict theory.

Weber (1905), as described by Lowith (1982), felt that Marx's arguments were too little rooted in the scientific method and too subjective. Weber would argue for "value free science" as the appropriate method to study all social subjects. It is through this logic that Weber takes a historical and future look at religion. Weber believed that in the past, socialization processes included religious elements and inspired a moral sense of duty and honor. To prove this idea, Weber examined how the Protestant ethic impacted economic action and, Weber argues, helped form the ideals of capitalism. Again we notice a relationship between religion and exchange, but Weber takes this rationalistic thinking a bit further with his emphasis on rationalization and the scientific process. Rationalization, as Weber relates it to life in general, is something that suppresses the human desire to believe in the magical properties of the world. Weber notices the increase in rationalization and bureaucracy and worries that these forces will work together to destroy the natural desire for the supernatural. Weber notes that as human science discovers more and more answers for the unexplainable that the world loses its sense of magic. Weber envisions a human future void of passion and belief but full of science and objectivity.

### Contemporary Religious Theory

A clearer understanding of classic sociological religious theory helps us to better understand contemporary religion, specifically religious experience theory, which Bainbridge (2010) has divided into four categories. The categories Bainbridge proposes are supernatural theory, societal theory, exchange theory, and cognitive theory. From these categories we can classify almost every religious theory and experience. If we

combine these theories, while keeping in mind the framework from classical religious theories, we have ways in which we can systematically define what may or may not be religion or religious experience.

Supernatural theory presupposes that a believer in a religious code or experience truly perceives the religious experience as real and acts on their own faith to prove it to themselves. Religions that follow supernatural theories dismiss the role of science in proving the existence of God or gods or evaluating any faith based claims. Supernatural religions do not necessarily dismiss the possibility that scientists may discover interesting and true things about community building through faith and the usefulness of religious practice. When it comes down to the “nuts and bolts” of the individual religious experience, those facts are based purely on faith and the sense in which a person believes. Supernatural theories are not rooted in science and are therefore the least helpful for the purposes of this paper. It is important to note that the supernatural experience may be the experience for some World of Warcraft players and is therefore worth examining in future research.

Societal theories tell us that religion is essentially a function of society and reflects the needs and desires of the community from which it is created. Societal theorists believe that religion is built from the society’s members and develops because of certain needs that are specific to the society. Much like a society would develop a police force to control crime or a fire station to deal with forest fires, societies create religion to satisfy needs of the community. Religious needs might include building a moral guideline for existence, answering what happens to humans when they die, or explaining what a rainbow is.

Societal theories stem from Durkheim's functionalist perspective, and Durkheim's five elements of religious life give us a framework for a society based examination of religious experience. One of the most famous and influential sociologists in this line of thinking was Talcott Parsons. Parsons (1978) writes about the "new resurgence of the non-rational," examining society's need for religious outlets. Parsons is writing during a time when religion was becoming more rational and corporate. Parsons predicted there would be a backlash against this type of religious experience and that society would demand more fundamental and classical religious leaders and ideas. Parsons believed that religion would serve as an individual's way of avoiding further rationalization. Parsons wrote these ideas even when it seemed to him that society was facing threats like nuclear war and experiencing progress in social issues like civil rights and welfare programs. Parsons and Durkheim viewed religion as a reflection of society as well as a necessary part of all cultures. It would be fair to say that people that subscribe to a societal theory of religion believe that religion exists in a tangible sense as long as society is present to create the religion.

Exchange based theories of religion and religious experience are based on the thinking of people like Marx and Weber. Exchange theories ignore the possibility of actual supernatural experience and do not subscribe to the view that societies will always develop their own religions. Exchange theorists believe that humans are motivated by needs and desires, and often these motivations cannot be achieved by individuals acting alone. Therefore in order to obtain the objects that motivate human life, people must be willing to give something in return to ensure present and future transactions. From a Marxian perspective this makes sense, because Marx often viewed life as a competition

between groups of people that occurs as a result of the existence of scarce goods in society. Exchange theorists believe that human social experiences are based on the constant exchange of items and ideas that come at various costs to the individuals. When humans desire a particular reward they will seek out other people or institutions they believe will provide that reward. These exchanges become more predictable and rational as the exchanges are repeated.

Bainbridge (2010) believes that the proper way to view these types of interactions is to consider the interactions like a computer algorithm, a set of instructions that lead to a particular outcome. Since some human desires reside outside of the natural world, a reliance on the algorithm provides the reward eventually. If the desire is eternal life, for example, humans put their “faith” into an algorithm that promises eternal life even after death. These algorithms function as “compensators” (Bainbridge 2010) or promises that humans will one day receive their desired reward.

Bainbridge finds it useful to distinguish between religious experience that develops from exchange and what the world knows as magic. Simply put, religion functions like a system of general compensators or algorithms, whereas magic demands faith in only one experience. Religion and magic exist as similar entities in the sense that they both can promise something “other worldly,” but religion is a much more complex system of exchanges. Religious belief is more convenient, however, because no reward can be disputed. A shaman that promises to cure cancer either cures the cancer or does not, but the results of the magical procedure are available for the society to witness. Failure of the shaman’s magic would lead individuals to turn to other exchange partners

for their needs, which might help explain why religion is a popular alternative and useful to a society in general.

When one begins to think of religion as an exchange, the possibilities of religion expand beyond the classical view. Luckmann (1990) offered a view of religion in which grand transcendent experiences are being replaced by smaller experiences that are more fitted to individual needs. Luckmann goes as far as to compare all religions as market place items that people desire and are becoming much more flexible to the average consumer's need. The process is somewhat complicated but it is simplified if we view humans as beings that want the most amount of an item at the least price. This way of looking at religious experience helps provide us a clearer picture of why religion has changed greatly but has not disappeared.

Bainbridge's fourth type of religious explanation is the cognitive theorist's view that religion is created from a psychological perspective. These types of theories are based on psychoanalytic theories by Sigmund Freud. Originally writing in 1929, Freud (2002) believed that religion may be a "shared neurosis" that involves a childish desire for wish fulfillment. Freud believed that children look to their parents for their immediate needs and wants and as humans grow older they move the role of "making things right" to a God figure. Freud believed this type of thinking to be a sickness and thought it may be possible to cure people of it.

Contemporary cognitive theorists disagree with Freud's theory but offer some variants that are worth exploring. Pinker (1997) asserts that belief in God comes from a human need for something or someone that is responsible for what happens to individuals or what occurs in nature. Because the human mind has the ability to imagine what it is

like to be another animal, plant, or place, the human mind may be “wired” to believe that a larger force is doing the same to us. In the same way that human hunters can predict the movement of a bear or a deer, God may emerge from a hyperactive section of the brain that forces people to believe the same is being done to them (Barret 2004).

It is through these theories that we may begin to quantify what a religion is and what experiences should be considered religious.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Statement of Research Questions

- Research Question 1 – How are World of Warcraft players creating and maintaining their online identities and forming communities?
- Research Question 2 – Can playing World of Warcraft be considered a religious or spiritual experience?
- Research Question 3 – Is World of Warcraft a new religious movement?

Data for this study were collected from World of Warcraft players using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The purpose of this study is to learn specifics about how World of Warcraft players are playing the game, as well as their beliefs about possible spiritual or religious connections. While I can envision a way in which this project could have been done using quantitative methods, the beliefs and behavior I wish to describe are more suited to qualitative methods. Respondents were freer to express complex opinions and beliefs that would be difficult to capture using quantitative methods.

All of the interviews for this project took place through text-chat conversations that occurred while both the interviewer and the interviewee were playing World of Warcraft. Respondents in this study were contacted in two ways. The first way was to randomly ask in World of Warcraft general chat channels if any player wished to

participate in an interview for this study. My character would enter highly populated areas of the game and simply ask if any players had 30-60 minutes of time to devote to an interview. I stipulated that respondents must be over 18 years of age and have a character that was of level 80-85. The age stipulation was because this study is not interested in measuring the behavior of children, and the level stipulation was so that the study captured the attitudes of players that were not new and had some time to orient themselves into World of Warcraft. In some instances, respondents were compensated 500-1000 World of Warcraft gold pieces for their time. This amount is roughly the equivalent of 30 minutes of labor in the game for a maximum level character.

I utilized the “snowball” technique to ask respondents to recommend anyone they might know who fit my qualifications and would be interested in an interview. This technique proved highly successful, as a typical interview would yield as many as two or three additional respondents. This method also helped increase the diversity of players sampled. These snowball-interviews often represented players that would not normally respond to an open chat-channel call for an interview.

The largest barrier that exists in collecting interviews is that the general chat channels are often full of “spam” and other messages that are scrutinized as untrustworthy. One way in which I compensated for this barrier was to solicit responses using my own high-level characters. This caused other players to consider my solicitation more seriously. This limited my data collection to the three servers where I had maximum or near maximum-level characters. Because I have some character investment on the servers I utilized for interviews, I was careful not to interview anyone

that previously knew who I was or anything about my character. With thousands of players on these servers, finding willing players who did not know me was not difficult.

Because I was interested in measuring the typical World of Warcraft player, I did not ask for any specific age or gender demographic, other than being over 18 years of age. Data were collected from 25 completed interviews. Seven respondents were female, and the age range for all respondents was 19-48. All of the interviews were conducted over a one-week time frame. Before asking any respondent a question, I informed them how their answers would be used and gave them my email address to contact if they had any questions.

Because it was not possible to collect a signed consent form, I was careful to inform participants that their responses were to be used as part of my thesis project, as well as remind respondents of their ability to skip any uncomfortable question or terminate the interview at any time. In 25 interviews, only one question was skipped and no interviews were prematurely terminated.

Respondent fatigue was only a minor issue because the interview process was very relaxed and many respondents were able to participate while still engaging in other in-game activities. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes with the longest going for approximately 90 minutes. Responses were recorded using the in-game “chatlog” feature which captures all the text my character speaks as well as the incoming text my character receives. This information is then stored in a log file which exists in my World of Warcraft computer directory. After every interview, I cut and pasted all of the text collected into a new file, and deleted all of the extra game messages my character

received. This process left a detailed interview transcription that even included time and date stamps.

For every interview I utilized an interview guide which included questions that I asked of every respondent. On occasion, respondents provided answers that required follow-up and clarification questions. New topics were sometimes introduced by respondents which I allowed respondents to elaborate on. On one occasion, I was contacted after an interview had ended by a respondent who wished to discuss some issues in more detail. Overall, respondents were willing and eager to discuss their World of Warcraft playing habits and spiritual or religious themes that may exist.

All of the methods and techniques used in this study were approved by Texas State University's Internal Review Board (IRB). I assured both the IRB and my respondents that the confidentiality of my respondents was a primary concern. The application and reference number for this project is 2010A7158.

Results were processed using Esterberg's (2002) method of open coding. I read the interviews several times in order to determine themes and created codes for those themes. Responses were placed into categories based on the language used or the topic discussed. In order to protect anonymity, I have changed all the respondents' names into identifying codes in this paper. Only I have access to all of the transcripts and they are digitally stored on devices owned by the author. The transcripts will be kept on encrypted media for up to ten years after the finalization of this paper and then destroyed.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Re-Statement of Research Questions

The purpose of this research project is to answer three research questions that I feel have not been properly addressed by other social research.

- RQ<sub>1</sub> – How are World of Warcraft players creating and maintaining their online identities and forming communities?
- RQ<sub>2</sub> – Can playing World of Warcraft be considered a religious or spiritual experience?
- RQ<sub>3</sub> – Is World of Warcraft a new religious movement?

I have collected 25 interviews from World of Warcraft players to help answer the research questions qualitatively. Respondents included seven females and eighteen males, ranging in age from nineteen to forty-eight. Interview questions covered topics including players gaming habits and their own religious beliefs. Quotes that are used in this project are the best examples of trends noticed by the researcher. The quotes have not been corrected for grammar and are presented exactly as they were transmitted to the researcher, except where bracketed text is used to clarify statements. Respondent's identities have been numbered in alphabetical order and do not reflect the order in which the interviews were collected.

RQ<sub>1</sub> – How are World of Warcraft players creating and maintaining their online identities and forming communities?

Central to the questions proposed in RQ<sub>2</sub> and RQ<sub>3</sub> is whether or not World of Warcraft players identify themselves as part of a community and how that functions in the game of World of Warcraft. Dawson (2004) presents the framework for examination of this question. Dawson has proposed six elements that must be found in order to label a group a community. The elements are interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, social control, personal concern, and that interactions occur in a public space.

Interactivity

Ultimately, World of Warcraft appears to center on social interactions. The main force that drives these interactions is player created guilds. Out of 25 interviews, 24 respondents identified themselves as guild members. For players, choosing a guild seems to be one of the most important decisions. Of all the players in guilds, every player recognized and considered some of the other guild members to be friends. Many respondents provided statements like this:

Well, since several members of my guild are alts, I'd say about 20 individual players are friends. I have not yet met any of my guild mates in real life, though I have met several players whom I consider to be friends in real life. (Respondent-3)

For many players, the guild is a home for people that bring pre-existing relationships into World of Warcraft:

We meet in Vegas about once a year, so almost all of the main members of the guild I have known since before I played WoW... and I would say at any given time our guild has consisted of 15 to 20 people I have known personally and considered friends. (Respondent-15)

For both the players that knew guild members in real life before joining a guild, and the people who knew no players in real life, each group had fellow guild members they considered friends even though they had never met in real life. This finding suggests that the players of World of Warcraft take these relationships created in-game seriously. These findings also suggest that there exists a high level of interactivity between the players of the game. Many players mentioned that joining a guild allows them to participate in activities in World of Warcraft that require many players to accomplish. Guilds tend to attract people with similar goals and inspire cooperation to progress and succeed in the game world.

#### Stability of Membership

Through relationships, interactivity, and cooperation, successful guilds create incentives for players to continue to play. Incentives may include fulfilling social relationships and higher status within the guild. Another prominent incentive mentioned several times by respondents is progressing one's character through in-game item upgrades. When a guild is working towards these goals successfully, membership stability increases dramatically.

Nearly every respondent reported belonging to a guild that was active in raiding. Raiding in World of Warcraft requires hours of commitment, and guilds that do not reward that commitment will not succeed. Successful raiding requires a core group of players that can be reliably counted on to research the encounters and prepare the rest of

the guild for success in the raid. From the guild members I interviewed, the stability of the group often comes from its leaders. The leader of a large guild responded:

My [guild] officers are leveraged to handle this side of the game, also consider this: we raid for a limited time and thus every second of preparation ensures a better experience [for the guild member].  
(Respondent-24)

It becomes important for guild leaders to create a stable and successful environment in which the guild can survive. It is not unlike a family in the sense that much of the success comes from the parents providing a safe and structured environment for the children to prosper. Those guilds that do a poor job of creating a stable and successful environment will find their members leaving to join more stable organizations. This is why the life-span of poorly managed guilds is very short and why guilds that have prospered for a long time, have very organized chains of command. Stability of the members does not mean that there are not plenty of members that come and go. Stability refers to the likelihood of the community existing at all. For the people I have interviewed, the stability of the guild seems to be a key factor in their decision to belong to the guild.

### Stability of Identity

In general, World of Warcraft allows the player to achieve a great deal of anonymity if the player desires. This possible anonymity detracts from the formation of community. If individuals are forming identities and community, researchers should expect to see a high level of identity stability. When a player belongs to a guild, it is usually assumed that all of the characters they play will also join the guild. For successful guilds, it becomes necessary for the members to make their characters

available at key times in order to succeed in game-related goals. As the guild becomes more reliant on individual players to achieve goals, stability of the player's identity becomes a key factor in the guild's success. Respondents often mentioned how important it was to be contactable:

No matter what character I am on, I make sure someone from the guild can contact me through a phone call, or using my realid handle. Lots of members of the guild count on me to be ready to raid at a moment's notice. (S-2)

Because World of Warcraft is a social game, it is important that players are able to contact each other during key times in the game. These times including raiding or grouping but also includes times when members may need to discuss a matter with another player. It is important to the guild stability, that no matter what character a player is playing, the player is available to contact and connect with other guild members. Often players will refer to other guild members by their real life names, rather than their characters' names to further build a sense of identity. If a player chooses not to make their character available, they will most likely not find success in raiding aspects of the game.

Many respondents reported traveling from game to game with many of the same people. The individual player builds their identity as a fellow gamer and is known by other members of the guild that way. For guilds that exist beyond the game of World of Warcraft, stability of identity becomes a very important aspect of playing the game. For guilds that exist only in World of Warcraft, success depends on being able to identify loyal players that are willing to contribute to the success of the guild. In World of Warcraft, identities are maintained and encouraged through interaction and dependence on fellow players.

## Social Control

The element of social control in a community represents an attempt to set standards for behavior. In World of Warcraft, social control functions in several interesting ways. The game itself sets certain rules that the player must follow or risk the chance of their account being suspended or banned. Violations that occur may include, threatening personal harm to another player, or cheating the system in some way to acquire more virtual goods. These forms of social control apply to every player.

Other elements of social control are designed and agreed upon by the guild members themselves. Players willingly apply to and join guilds with rigid moral and behavioral guidelines. When I asked players how guild decisions were handled, the overwhelming response was that guild matters are handled by a select few individuals who make the majority of decisions and set the majority of rules. The following quote represents a typical response about guild decision making:

I have raid officers, assistant officers, and helpers, I also have a council that advises me on how the guild feels about certain issues, but in the end I make all the decisions for the good of the guild, and expect, no demand all my officers back it up 100% even if they disagree. (Respondent-1)

How guilds maintain social control, is a research topic within itself. What seems to be occurring in these guilds is that members are drawn in by a desire to progress in the game and develop social relationships. A player then becomes willing to follow the rules and social codes set up by the guild leader or a select number of guild officers. To break these rules on too many occasions would certainly lead to a player's dismissal from the guild. The rules set by the guild leaders can be so strict that players often feel uneasy

about communicating their thoughts. The following quote represents many respondents feelings toward voicing opinions in guild chat:

The guild does use ventrillo (voice communication tool). I do not speak in vent. The only time I've ever spoke in vent was one fight, but I've used it a couple times for general social activity. I have seen players say dumb things in vent and get trashed by the guild for making a bad suggestion, so I choose to avoid the chance of ridicule. (S-2)

The more successful a guild becomes at raiding, the higher the likelihood of a strict set of behavioral rules. Guilds that are more focused on building social relationships and less focused on raiding, have members that mock the stricter rules put in place by higher-end raiding guilds:

Ok so this was a more of a family and friends guild that just kept getting bigger... my opinion is that all this asinine "fill out an application on the web" stuff is utterly counterproductive. Never heard of such a stupid thing. This is a GAME HELLLLLOOOO NOT A JOB INTERVIEW!!!!!! (Respondent-20)

High-end raiding guilds seem to serve as social control for friends and family guilds because the high-end raiding guild serves as an example of how not to behave. Players seem to take pride in falling into either category of play style and also seem willing to abide by both the rules set in place by the game developers and the rules set in place by their guilds.

### Personal Concern

The element of personal concern represents the level of support a player receives from other players in the game regarding things like decisions, preparations or comfort and support. Outside of the community of the guild, it seems that players do not have a

lot of personal concern for fellow players. Several players mentioned how they felt the average World of Warcraft player was not a likeable individual:

My theory is, if you picked 1000 random WoW players, about 800 would be people to avoid. Generally people that are unpleasant to be around, people are greedy and only care about things that help themselves. People think they know everything about the game and like to tell other people how bad they are.(Respondent-5)

This type of sentiment gets completely reversed when players discuss their fellow guild members. Every guild member admits to having several friends within their guild and it was common for guild members to know each other in real life. Several guild members mentioned that their guild hosted real-life gatherings on an annual basis. For members of guilds like that, the level of personal concern is very high.

#### Interaction occurs in a Public Space

For Dawson (2004), the public space in question would be the World of Warcraft game. While World of Warcraft is a privately run business, and is not accessible to all, the existing members create their own public space. For communities to be built, they should be obvious and identifiable. In World of Warcraft, it is impossible to hide your guild affiliation, and any player is instantly identified as belonging to a specific guild. Not every guild is open to every player, but nearly all guilds have some method for joining and restrictions on recruiting.

Through these guidelines and methods, we can identify communities that exist in World of Warcraft. It is clear that World of Warcraft adheres to all the necessary requirements to identify specific online communities. It is less likely that researchers can

consider every World of Warcraft player a member of a community, but it is obvious that many players are participating in a community. In order for these communities to exist, players must construct representations of themselves within these communities. For some players, these relationships are more real and important than their relationships in the real world. How these communities are formed and what is important to the members gives us an interesting look at the virtual communities of World of Warcraft in 2011.

RQ2 Can playing World of Warcraft be considered a religious or spiritual experience?

While it is obvious that many players in World of Warcraft form communities and create identities, it is less obvious what the results of this process may be. Zijderveld (2008) suggested that many players may be seeking out religious fulfillment in games like World of Warcraft. I found this to be an intriguing idea worthy of more investigation. In order to answer RQ2, we must first set up a framework for defining religion. As noted in the literature review, scholars have defined and categorized religious experience for centuries. For this paper, I believe it is most appropriate to view religion through the lens of Durkheim (1915). Durkheim's five elements of religious life have been one of the most influential ideas in sociological religious thought. Durkheim's categorization is also helpful because it offers a basic look at what it takes for something to be considered religious.

Durkheim's first measure of the religious life is that there must be a division between sacred and profane objects in the world. World of Warcraft is a virtual world that is full of virtual objects. There is no doubt that players value objects within the game, as is shown by players willingness to pay real currency for virtual items. Value is

not enough to consider something sacred. We might value our car in real life, but we do not necessarily instill that object with sacred feelings and emotions. There are items that exist in World of Warcraft to which the players themselves have assigned sacred properties. One of the greatest examples of this was told to me by a guild leader that held a regular guild initiation every month. After a trial period, guild members that are accepted are awarded a red uniform as a signal that they are a welcomed member of the guild. The guild leader described the process like this:

We make it hard to stay in, we demand a pretty high standard. We gather as a guild... an average of 80-100 members and we all dress up in red uniforms and parade to the cathedral, we have an elaborate ceremony where they [the new guild members] are recognized and welcome as new Knights of Excessus. (Respondent-1).

These uniforms are kept and cherished by the guild members and are used regularly in guild ceremonies. The guild uniform, as awarded by the guild, is an item that represents belonging and accomplishment by the members of that guild. Other guilds have similar objects that they value including their guild tabard (shirt worn by guild members) that is created by the guild to distinguish their members from other players. Like in real life, objects in World of Warcraft have no sacred value until the players create that value. The sacredness of an object is completely unknown to a person unfamiliar with the game or the guild. By every measure of Durkheim's standards, these objects are sacred.

Durkheim's second measure of the religious life reflects the belief in the supernatural. The majority of the players I interviewed held some form of religious belief, which suggests they may willing to accept the possibility of supernatural forces in World of Warcraft, but the majority made no obvious connection between World of

Warcraft and classical supernatural events. Supernatural elements do not need to be obvious. Durkheim recognized that a belief in a moral code itself is sometimes a supernatural element. As I pointed out in RQ1, moral codes exist in every guild, and the guild members are required to accept and participate in that code. To me, this seems like a very strong bond when you consider the time invested by the player into guilds and guild activities. It is obvious that the player considers these rules to be an important part of their life. Respondents frequently mentioned how important it was to follow the rules of the guild:

I can't imagine what might happen to me if I didn't agree with the officers rules, I am sure I would get kicked out of the guild and I would feel like I have wasted a lot of time and really be devastated.(Respondent-13)

While many people appear to feel this way, the vast majority of respondents were not willing to admit the respect for guild rules was anything more than the way the game is played. While clearly in the minority, some players recognized the possibility of spiritual existence while playing World of Warcraft instantly. A software engineer I interviewed spoke frequently about the idea of "immersion" in the game. When I asked about the possibility of religious experience in World of Warcraft she had the following to say:

Since I am a software engineer, I may get things out of WoW that a regular player wouldn't but here is what I think: I find beauty in the art of creation, and if that creation has the ability to immerse me so completely (as it has) that I can spend hours upon hours upon hours playing, then I would say that the creativity has a certain spirituality about it.  
(Respondent-20)

This particular person represented the opinion of a small number of my respondents, but her tone speaks to a connection with World of Warcraft that I did not expect to see. For the majority of players interviewed, World of Warcraft is not

obviously supernatural. There are elements of World of Warcraft that are easy to relate to supernatural experience and feeling however, I believe most players do not connect World of Warcraft and the supernatural.

The third measure of the religious life is belief in divinity. Durkheim proposed that the belief in divinity would help people explain the unexplainable events that occur in our lives. The majority of respondents came into World of Warcraft with these sorts of beliefs already. Most respondents claimed to already believe in some form of religion that helped those players answer the mysterious questions that life creates. None of the respondents gave any responses that indicate that World of Warcraft created a belief in some sort of divinity. However, there were a substantial number of respondents who claimed that World of Warcraft could have divinely-based origins. In much the same way that people may believe a sunset or a rainbow was divinely inspired, some expressed the same sorts of beliefs about World of Warcraft. When asked about the possibility of religious or spiritual expression in World of Warcraft, some respondents responded similar to this:

Inasmuch as every moment of every day should be considered sacred and spent in following the leadings of Spirit, yes. Specifically and exclusively, no. Moreso than any other moment in life, no. (Respondent-3)

Responses similar to the previous respondent were most common in people that expressed Pagan or Wiccan spiritual beliefs. Classically religious and atheist respondents were more unlikely to attribute any divine properties to World of Warcraft. What is also interesting is that the vast majority of respondents believed that other players may find divine or spiritual answers while playing World of Warcraft. Many respondents reported feeling like this:

For myself, it is difficult to imagine that WoW could be any sort of religious experience, but for other players I know, I imagine WoW might be real important to their lives and WoW could give their lives direction. (Respondent-18).

In World of Warcraft, there appears to be a perception among players that many “other players” are utilizing World of Warcraft in ways which are radical. To me, this suggests that players are open to the idea of spiritual experience in World of Warcraft, but not willing to admit that spiritual experiences might be happening to them. Several explanations for this behavior are possible. It is likely that respondents have not been faced with questions regarding spirituality and World of Warcraft. Respondents had a limited time to consider their answers and I believe their initial response was to reject the idea for themselves. For these respondents, using World of Warcraft as religious experience represented deviant behavior.

I believe respondents are using other players’ possible behavior to justify their own playing of the game. For religious players, this functions in at least two ways. The first way in which this attitude functions is that respondents can reinforce their own religious beliefs by viewing spiritual experience in World of Warcraft as a silly and immature form of religious expression. Religious players can also justify their own playing behavior by pointing to examples of players that are far more involved in the game than themselves. Ironically, I found no evidence of any player using World of Warcraft in the religious ways which players seem to imagine possible. This mythical religious player seems to be an imagined generalized other that reinforces religious beliefs and gaming habits.

One question, which is often answered by religion, is what happens when humans die. Bainbridge (2010) suggests that online games like World of Warcraft will soon be

able to collect players' chat-logs and record their in-game activity in order to create a character that generally behaves and speaks as the person inspired by that character. I wondered how players of World of Warcraft might feel about this possibility and whether the players viewed this eternal avatar as a solution to the question of what happens when we physically die. Reaction to this eternal avatar was mixed. Several respondents embraced the idea and were willing to sign up immediately. Other respondents were completely turned off by the idea. Across the spectrum of opinions, it was almost unanimously agreed that there would be a substantial number of other players interested in this service. One of the most entertaining responses was provided by Respondent 13:

[The avatar] Might walk talk and act like me but there's only one and everyone should be thankful for that. But yeah I wouldn't mind. Be kind of funny to think I'm still out there telling people where they can go after I was gone. Just wish I could come back and see it. (Respondent-13)

It is surprising that with this generally positive reaction that no video game or businesses has yet provided this sort of service. In a simple situation like a video game character, the technology is very close to achieving creation of characters modeled after individuals (Bainbridge 2010). Of the players I interviewed, several suggested this might provide some sense of comfort for them after they have physically died. This sort of feeling was expressed more often when the respondent mentioned they had children:

Like I said I have a daughter, and if/when I passed away if there were a way for her to interact with me, even in a shallow way like a game, it may be nice to have that available. (Respondent-2)

The possibility of "digital immortality" is one of the most interesting aspects of how playing World of Warcraft might be related to religious experience. Conversations with respondents around the subject of the eternal avatar sparked some of the most

thought-provoking insights. I believe that when the possibility of digital immortality becomes a reality, research results in a paper like this one will look very different.

Durkheim's fourth measure was the presence of the negative cult. In World of Warcraft this idea functions in several ways. The first way is that the game itself imposes rules on behavior for your character and account. These rules are designed by the game developers and inhibit some of the activities a person's character may wish to do. The game company also puts restrictions on activities that the game still allows, yet players are punished for participating in. Some of those activities transcend the game and spread into areas like the game message board forums. Posting harassing information on those forums can lead to a permanent ban from the game. Sending harassing information in-game may lead to similar results.

Guilds themselves set codes of conduct that must be followed to remain in the guilds organization. Guilds often create social guidelines that are intended to create a comfortable atmosphere in the guild. For example, rules were mentioned that did not allow swearing in guild chat. Characters that break guild rules too often are usually removed from their guild. It is unclear how guild rules and guidelines may translate to real-life moral guidelines. It is not hard to believe that these guilds may function as examples of how to behave in social situations in order to be accepted by others. Game and guild rules clearly affect the decisions players make.

These sorts of guild rules and social structures lack the metaphysical element necessary for Durkheim's negative cult. The written and unwritten rules of belonging to a guild function in much the same way as a negative cult might function, however, there is little to no metaphysical attachment to these regulations. This is as close as any aspect

of World of Warcraft comes to resembling the negative cult element, and these regulations are close.

The final measure of religious life is that of ritual. Ritual is one of the most powerful elements noticed in World of Warcraft. Every respondent that was active in raiding acknowledged several important rituals that occur with every raid. These activities occur in groups as well as individually. The raid is a ritual that must be prepared for, and the participants accept and often welcome the rituals that are required. For successful raids, each player must prepare their character for the encounters. This preparation takes many different forms but can easily be described as ritual. Respondents spoke about raid preparations in this way:

When the guild leader announces the time for a raid, we work in groups to ensure every member is ready to go, we spend a lot of time together preparing the newer members for what to expect in a raid... it's one of my favorite activities because it makes me feel like I am a part of something bigger. (Respondent-12)

The rituals in World of Warcraft seem to inspire player bonding. It is partially because there are not a lot of solitary activities you can do in World of Warcraft. Other rituals in World of Warcraft are more spontaneous. Many rituals in World of Warcraft mirror real-world rituals. During my time in World of Warcraft, I noticed an in-game funeral for a deceased player. This event was held at the largest church in the capitol city and looked like a very grand state funeral with hundreds of attendees. Similar events occur when characters decide to get married. Although there is no in-game functionality for marriage, some players choose to recognize their characters are married.

By Durkheim's standards, we must recognize that many of the elements of classic religious definition are present in World of Warcraft. Every measure is present in World of Warcraft in some form. These findings do not exist for every player, and it is clear that playing World of Warcraft is a different experience for different players. There are some players that seem to treat the game as pure relaxation and recreation. There are other players who take World of Warcraft very seriously. Some respondents readily admit that playing World of Warcraft is a spiritual experience for them. These findings speak to the possibilities that exist in World of Warcraft and games like it. The dedication and immersion these players are willing to commit to, signal that there may be important social phenomena attached to the game. For some players the phenomena is religious or spiritual in nature

### RQ3 Is World of Warcraft a new religious movement?

Research questions one and two set up the possibility that World of Warcraft might be a new religious movement. In question one, I examined how community and identity are formed in World of Warcraft. The community element is the first element that must be present in order for any possibility of a new religious movement (Dawson 2004). Community in World of Warcraft is present and particularly obvious when we examine the role of the guild. In question two, I examined how the act of playing World of Warcraft may be a measurable spiritual experience. Research question three is the logical question that arises after we show community and religious possibility.

There was no compelling evidence that World of Warcraft players perceive the game as a new religious movement. While several respondents admitted that playing

World of Warcraft could be a religious or spiritual experience, the trend among those players was to elaborate on how their own religion supported the spiritual feelings they get when playing World of Warcraft. Linking World of Warcraft and spiritual experience was particularly prominent for those players who belonged to a less widely used religion. Respondents who classified themselves as Wiccan or Pagan were much more likely to respond that playing World of Warcraft can be spiritual for them. Common statements that emerged from the interviews explained how World of Warcraft playing could be similar to meditation. The following respondent spoke about how World of Warcraft playing was a way in which they cope with life's difficulties:

A spiritual experience, no...but a meditation definitely... as an object in flux it [playing World of Warcraft] can help you focus on something other than your own trials: I don't deny the possibility of spiritual experience from mmorpg [massively multiplayer online role playing game] - just saying I haven't found it. (Respondent-10)

This quote is very interesting because the respondent admits to using World of Warcraft as a coping mechanism but doesn't seem to acknowledge that religion is ultimately a coping mechanism. Statements like these are further evidence that we cannot classify World of Warcraft as a new religious movement. Though players admit to using World of Warcraft in religious ways, players do not recognize the possibility that the game itself may be filling a religious role in their life. One of the main reasons there is a low level of recognition between actions and beliefs is that it is a radical idea to equate video game playing to religious fulfillment.

For respondents, the average time spent playing per week was around 30 hours. This suggests a level of commitment to the game that may eclipse players' commitment to religious activity. I asked my respondents if World of Warcraft players were more

committed to the game or to their religion. Most respondents claimed that players are much more committed to the game. The following quote was a typical response when asked about the religious commitment of World of Warcraft players:

The average WoW player is probably not very religious at all, and way more committed to the game, although I hold strong religious beliefs, I don't spend more than an hour or two on them a week, so yeah players are likely more dedicated to WoW. (Respondent-4)

Even with players using World of Warcraft in spiritual ways and admitting to extreme commitments to the game, it would not be correct to call World of Warcraft a new religious movement. There is little doubt that there is something culturally important going on related to video games. It is also true that some video games are functioning like religions function in individuals lives. It is not true that video game playing is therefore a religious movement.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

World of Warcraft is an enormously popular video game. During the life-span of the game, it has revolutionized the way online role-playing games are developed and the way people play them. Individuals are willing to invest massive amounts of time and money into playing this socially-based video game. World of Warcraft has set the standard for online role-playing games, and many of the upcoming online role playing games are modeled after the World of Warcraft experience. World of Warcraft clearly contributes to our culture and is worthy of social research.

Individuals who play World of Warcraft are invested in the social relationships this game creates. Those relationships are most obvious and important for fellow guild members. Guild members spend many hours every week working towards common goals and strengthening relationships. Individuals who are most invested in the game, are likely to be very invested in a guild. The way guilds operate is an area worthy of further investigation. It would be interesting to investigate how guilds hold people accountable and reinforce social norms.

World of Warcraft has developed communities that are primarily centered on the guild. What makes community building in World of Warcraft possible is the creation of relatively stable identities that people begin to expect and count on in order to progress in the game. It is also obvious that people genuinely care about the other individuals they

meet in the game and consider them friends even though they may have never met in real life. Individuals are encouraged to follow the regulations set up by the game developers as well as the guilds themselves and most individuals appear to follow those norms.

In terms of religious experience, World of Warcraft fits Durkheim's (1915) description of what a religion must be and do. All of Durkheim's necessary religious elements are fulfilled in some form, and I have illustrated some of the ways in which those forms exist in World of Warcraft. The "raid" is a particular mechanism that builds much social unity and creates ritual. It is possible for a player to use World of Warcraft as a substitute for religion or to strengthen their belief in an existing religion.

While it is possible to consider playing World of Warcraft to be a religious experience, the majority of players do not consider the act of playing to be a new part of a religious movement. During my interviews, no respondent believed that the act of playing World of Warcraft was in and of itself a religion. The potential for players to one day relate the act of playing World of Warcraft to a religious activity is evident. This relationship will become apparent if a game company institutes "digital immortality" as a function in their game. Several players I spoke to mentioned how a feature like "digital immortality" would interest them very much. Players would invest a lot of time into ensuring that their immortal avatar acted as much like the individual as possible.

Philosophers like Weber (1905), believed that religion would become a less influential force in society as we continue to rationalize our daily lives. While I believe Weber is correct, this rationalization seems to be happening in interesting ways. We are certainly seeing a decline in modern religious participation, but experiences like playing World of Warcraft are replacing many individuals' needs for traditional religion. I do not

believe video games are the only way in which this behavior occurs. Many social hobbies likely function as religion in similar ways. As it stands now, we would seem to be in the middle of that process, and this study provides evidence of that. I have shown how many people have utilized a digital world in completely religious ways. It may very well lead to a new religious movement, but for now World of Warcraft represents a spiritual mix that is complex and valuable to study.

## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

#### Opening Statement

Thank you for agreeing to answer my questions. My name is Adam Perkins and I am a graduate student at Texas State University and my email is [ap1378@txstate.edu](mailto:ap1378@txstate.edu). I will be using your responses as data in an academic paper. You are free to not answer any question you do not wish to answer as well as terminate the interview at any time.

#### Questions:

What is your age and gender?

How long have you been playing World of Warcraft and how many hours per week do you play on average?

Why did you decide to play on your realm and pick the character class you did?

What were the factors that went into choosing your characters name?

Do you belong to a guild and is the guild active in particular raids, pvp or leveling events?

Approximately how many members of the guild do you consider friends, and do you know them in real life?

What sorts of activities do you enjoy most in World of Warcraft?

When given the option, do you prefer to solo, random group or dedicated group when you play?

Are there any preparations necessary for guild events? Does your guild use ventrillo or other voice technology? Do you participate?

How are decisions that affect your guild made (recruitment, pve goals)?

My research project is about spiritual experiences in World of Warcraft. The next few questions are more specific to your spiritual beliefs and experiences.

What religious beliefs do you hold in your real life?

Do you believe that playing World of Warcraft can be a religious activity?

Do you believe that other people that play World of Warcraft believe it is a religious activity?

Do you believe that the average World of Warcraft player is more dedicated to the game of World of Warcraft or their church and how do you feel?

In the future, it may be possible for an organization like Blizzard, with your permission, to collect your text-chat responses and log your activities in game for the purpose of creating an in game avatar that behaves and communicates similar to your present self. Is this a service you would support or not and why?

*Follow up questions will be asked to clarify answers and expand on specific topics*

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