

WORLD OF WARCRAFT AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

By

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To my little fluff-ball, Chewie

You will always be missed.

Rest in peace

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The goal of this study is to understand how the popular on-line role-playing game, World of Warcraft, plays a role in romantic relationships among college-aged individuals (19-28) and how couples construct their relationships in the presence of virtual lives. As a game that boasts around 12 million subscribers, World of Warcraft, or WoW, is only one of many ways people are using the internet to create a virtual self. How does this virtual world interact with the construction of romantic relationships? This question is even more important when young adults, who are still shaping their personal identities and learning how to manage a romantic relationship, are involved. Through face-to-face and online interviews with eleven couples, this study seeks to understand the influence and perceptions of WoW, how couples negotiate the game in the context of their relationships, and how virtual lives play a role in the shaping of romantic relationships. The findings highlight the importance of the following concerns in navigating game-play within the context of relationships: perceptions of the game among both players and non-playing partners and the role of conflicting perceptions in potentially influencing relationship quality and problems; how concerns about time use, shared activities, socializing within the game, and potential addictive behaviors are negotiated; and examining WoW play within the larger context of relationship history, shared interests, and interactions. WoW

provides players with the opportunity and platform for figuratively stepping beyond the real, physical world and interacting with millions of other people to engage in a virtual civic society. The game therefore provides an excellent focal point for examining how people negotiate between both their real and virtual relationships and, in turn, how society is changing in this technological era

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In the groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (1995) posited that society is exhibiting a decrease in civic engagement due to declining social capital. Putnam described this social capital as “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (p. 664). Social capital is essentially responsible for connections within and between social networks that keep society running smoothly. Using the example of the reduction in the number of bowling leagues in the US since the 1960s, Putnam (2000) illustrated how people in American society no longer came together to connect with each other and argued that civic engagement had deteriorated in recent history, adversely affecting society as a whole.

Other research has found that inclusion in social networks and the maintenance of close social ties are vital to individual well-being (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). If civic society has deteriorated, however, how do individuals preserve their psychological well-being? Conceivably, technology had provided new ways to interact that were not recognized by Putnam, who was writing in the early stages of the public diffusion of e-mail and internet. In the 21st century, family members and friends have the ability to communicate with each other in a matter of seconds regardless of distance. Government meetings are live-streamed over the internet as well as broadcast live on television, giving the public up-to-the-minute information about policy decisions. Business associates conduct video and chat meetings with sister corporations in countries thousands of miles apart on Skype or other voice or visual internet protocols. It seems that technology, particularly the internet, has provided society with a new medium in which civic society might thrive. Yet if this supposition is true, how does the shift to

virtual life affect social ties in the “real” world, particularly those close relationships that form the basis of society?

Researchers have previously studied the impacts of the internet on perceptions of the self, personal relationships, and social involvement with somewhat mixed results. For instance, Bargh and McKenna (2004) sought to explain how the internet affected individual well-being, social relationships, group membership and social identity, and workplace and community involvement. Contrary to the common stereotypes of online communities as groups of lonely, depressed individuals, Bargh and McKenna found that the internet often facilitated communication between family and friends and ultimately presented an opportunity to create new social bonds with others who shared common interests. Similarly, in a 2002 study (Kraut et al.), researchers found that the internet substantially improved communication, social involvement, and well-being among extroverted, but not introverted, individuals. In yet another study, researchers found that there was only a slight association between internet usage and social support or personality (Swickert, Hittner, Harris, & Herring, 2002).

With the plethora of activities the internet provides, it is important to study its effects with regards to the specific activity that the individual favors. This study represents a step toward rectifying this issue by focusing on the popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), World of Warcraft. The purpose of this study was to understand how World of Warcraft affected romantic relationships among college-aged adults and how these couples constructed their relationships in the presence of a virtual life. Romantic relationships among young adults were at the center of this study, as romantic relationships early in life have been shown to help an individual develop a sense of personal identity (Erikson, 1968) and to become socialized with the act of forming close unions with others (Collins, 2003). In addition to

observing this process in the presence of World of Warcraft, this study also assessed how the game directly affected interpersonal relationships.

World of Warcraft is an MMORPG that allows a multitude of players to interact with each other and engage in various activities together. In constructing their online characters, players within this virtual world may choose between two opposing factions, known as Alliance and Horde, and within each faction, they may choose from among six unique races. Players also choose from one of ten classes available to both factions which offer different fighting abilities. Because World of Warcraft (WoW) is such a rich realm filled with its own lore, norms, and dialect, to carry out this study, the researcher created a character in March of 2010 in order to explore and become familiar with the game. The researcher attained a level 85 night elf hunter, the highest level possible as of this writing. The amount played varied based on available free time but overall ranged from not playing at all for weeks at a time to playing 25-30 hours per week. During these sessions, the researcher engaged in dungeons, raids, battlegrounds, questing, and general grinding (see Glossary in Appendix). Playing WoW enabled this researcher to understand the allure of the game and guide interview questions more effectively

Examining the influence of WoW among couples in romantic relationships can contribute to a better understanding of internet activity as heterogeneous and supports the importance of studying various forms of internet use in contemporary lives. WoW currently boasts almost 12 million subscribers around the world, and the massive influence of this virtual nation has created a new culture of social gamers (Blizzard, 2011). Considering that players have the opportunity to figuratively leave this world and interact with millions of other real people and engage in a virtual civic society, the game provides an excellent opportunity to examine how people negotiate between both their real and virtual relationships. Is this new medium of social

interaction having adverse effects on real life relationships due to the de-facto distance caused by this different world or has the popular MMORPG become a supplement to social engagement that can enrich relationships? How are couples navigating the real and virtual world and what methods have they developed to incorporate the virtual element?

Chapter 2 introduces available literature concerning this study. The current literature that is available does not discuss WoWand romantic relationships specifically, but research concerning MMORPGs and romantic relationships has been reviewed separately. The theoretical frameworks and expectations used to approach this study are also included in chapter two.

Chapter 3 discusses the methods utilized to complete the study. Specifically, this chapter describes the research design, sample and sampling selection, data collection, and data analysis. This chapter also discusses the researcher's position going into this study for the sake of transparency.

Chapters 4 and 5 represent the results of the study. The results were separated into two chapters because of a division that arose between the perceptions that couples had concerning WoWand the actions that couples took in order to navigate the virtual element that essentially became part of their relationship.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the study, pointing out major themes that developed over the course of the interviews. This chapter also closes with the implications of this research and discusses the limitations encountered during data collection.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Massively Multiplayer Online Games and Perceptions of Social Gaming

Despite its widespread popularity, many people view gaming as a “childish fad.” However, Bainbridge (2010) points out the majority of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) players are adults, disproportionately male, and come from different walks of life. Although fewer women are involved, accounting for between 15-25% of online players (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; Pineiro –Escoriaza, 2009), their odds of playing increase substantially if they have a partner that plays. In fact, a recent study showed that 75.6% of females who played MMORPGs had a partner that played as well (Knox, Zusman, White, & Haskins, 2009). In addition, although these statistics pertain to all MMORPGs and not only World of Warcraft (referred to hereafter with the abbreviation WoW), studies have shown not only the prevalence of women in online gaming but the potential influence gaming has on romantic partners. Online gaming should not be taken lightly and its prevalence among people worldwide underscores the importance of looking at the social impacts of WoW. Does WoW, have the ability to replace “real-world connections with virtual, game moderated ones” (Williams, 2006, p. 15)? What would happen if people began logging onto this virtual world instead of meeting for drinks after work or if “families stopped watching television and started playing games” (2006, p. 15)? When romantic couples are involved, what could happen when movie nights become raid nights or a day with the girls becomes a day of questing in the dungeons?

A common stereotype of WoW claims that players lose touch with reality, becoming socially withdrawn as they develop an addiction. A quick search on the internet for “WoW

widows” yields literally thousands of links to internet support groups for people who have “lost” their spouses to an addiction to WoW. In one study, researchers found that 32.9% of female respondents had become upset with their partner’s video game habits while another 4.5% of males had reported that they had told their partner they spent too much time playing video games (Knox, Zusman, White, & Haskins, 2008). Yet another internet search of the phrase “WoW ruined my life” returns a multitude of websites where players and ex-players discuss how the popular MMORPG had caused them to flunk out of school or lose their jobs, scholarships, or significant others. This perception is supported by research that has found that the more time a person spent playing online games, the more they felt that the quality of their interpersonal relationships decreased (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005). However, scholars have attempted to distinguish whether problems for which WoW is blamed are caused by an addiction to the game itself or whether certain people have a predisposition towards developing addictive behavior (Peters & Malesky, 2008). Peters and Malesky (2008) report that “the greater amount of time individuals spend playing WoW, the more likely they are to experience problems in their lives”, but this relationship was only moderate, suggesting that “not everyone who spends a great deal of time playing experiences numerous or severe problems in their lives” (p. 482). Thus, it is important to note that common negative beliefs about WoW are not clearly supported by empirical studies. Regardless, these perceptions could become a factor in how players negotiate their romantic relationships when their partner or other members of their social networks believe the negative stereotypes.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some argue that WoW is simply another form of social contact and should be welcomed as a shift in social medium. Knox, Zusman, White, and Haskins (2009) argue that while assessing whether video games cause aggression in people, the

context of the game play should be kept in mind since “playing a game with one’s peers may be more of an exercise in peer interaction than aggressive modeling” (p. 10). In a game like WoW, where players interact with both computer-generated characters and real people, peer interaction plays a large part in game-play. Contrary to the negative stereotypes of WoW and other MMORPGs, “twenty percent of the respondents...reported that gaming helped them make new friends or improve existing relationships” while another “sixty-five percent reported that gaming did not take them away from spending time with family and friends” (Knox, Zusman, White, & Haskins, 2009, p. 11).

If negative outcomes are linked to certain types of play, particularly play that is addictive, then how can one discern the “in control” player from the addict? Studies have shown that non-addicts were attracted to video games because of the satisfaction that game-play gave them; addicts, however, tended to play in order to relieve a sense of dissatisfaction they had when not playing (Wan & Chiou, 2006). It is also important to question whether it is the MMORPG that causes addictive behavior or if some people simply have a predisposition to developing addictive behaviors towards WoW; Peters and Malesky (2008) argued this point stating that, based on a five-factor model for measuring personalities, four out of five “personality characteristics were significantly correlated with problematic usage” (p. 482). This would support the argument that addiction may depend on an individual’s personality rather than the structure of the game.

Regardless of whether the individual has a predisposition towards developing an addiction to WoW or the game itself fosters an environment conducive to problematic usage, the impact that gaming has on romantic relationships is becoming more apparent. An exchange perspective on interpersonal relationships provides some insight into the potential implications of game playing for relationships. Knox, Zusman, White, and Haskins (2009) speculate that any

interaction between two people “can be understood in terms of each individual seeking the most benefits at the least cost so as to have the highest ‘profit’ and avoid a ‘loss’. This holds true with romantic relationships: an individual can become frustrated with their gaming partner when gaming habits begin to translate into a loss of interaction instead of a profit from each other’s company (2009). Castronova (2005) posits that gaming can cause relationship stress and create a “de facto” distance between the couple; however, this can be negotiated by one person entering into the other’s virtual world to interact with the other. If one or both of the individuals refuses to cross over, this distance may eventually weaken the relationship. Drawing from McLuhan and Fiore (1967) who were concerned with television at the time, the reason this distance develops between partners could be a result of the medium itself, in this case, MMORPGs; new media are “reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life” (p. 2). As a new medium for both game play and social interaction, WoW represents a particularly intriguing development that may have profound implications for romantic relationships and other interpersonal interactions.

Elements of Interpersonal Relationships

When attempting to understand how World of Warcraft can affect the quality of a relationship, it is vital to examine the factors associated with a strong relationship. Many scholars research the strength of romantic relationships using interdependence theory. Rooted in social exchange theory, this approach explains that partners become increasingly dependent upon each other, especially in regards to emotional support, leading to high levels of satisfaction in the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). This theory identifies three main characteristics with regard to the quality of romantic relationships: level of satisfaction or rewarding outcomes,

the quality of alternative partners, and the level of investment in the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Simpson, 1987). It is important to note that “alternatives” refer not only to possible romantic partners but to any person outside of the relationship, including friends, family, or even one’s self (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Although the literature has tended to focus on relational alternatives, this definition of alternatives could be defined more broadly to encompass certain activities such as job-related work or gaming, which could take time away from a partner. Investment size is also clarified as “the magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship – resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end” (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, p. 359).

Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto (1989) have found evidence that relationship closeness is influenced by the frequency with which partners are together, the diversity of their activities, and the amount of perceived influence each person feels their partner has over their life. The diversity in activities plays an especially important part in developing interdependence since it gives partners the opportunity to have “frequent and strong impacts on each other...across time” within differing situations (Simpson, 1987, p.684). Not only does the diversity of activities contribute to the closeness of a relationship but the presence of routine patterns of interaction and shared goals are good indicators of a mentally intimate relationship (1987).

The partner’s level of commitment to the relationship is also significant in determining a couple’s closeness. Partners tend to experience higher levels of closeness when they undergo a “transformation of motivation” to be in the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). When this transformation has occurred, partners will become more accommodating when their significant other behaves poorly and, instead of retaliating, sacrifice activities they enjoy that are not conducive to their partner’s preferences, belittle possible alternative suitors, and perceive the

relationship as superior to other relationships (1998). Further, an individual's level of commitment serves as a strong predictor, often functioning as an intermediary between the effects of satisfaction, alternatives, and investments, when a partner is faced with the decision of remaining in a relationship or not (1998).

Other personal aspects that can affect relationship closeness include differences in age, race, educational aspirations, and intelligence, which could add stress to the relationship (Simpson, 1987). Personal characteristics such as a tendency to feel lonely or depressed can adversely affect perceptions of social support and, in turn, cause the individual to have a negative outlook on their relationship (Gurung, Sarason, & Sarason, 1997).

There is also significance in how a person approaches a relationship, particularly whether they look at their relationship as destined to be or something they control. Knee's (1998) in-depth, qualitative study of relationships highlights the differences between destiny theorists and relationship cultivators. Whereas destiny theorists tend to believe in love at first sight, immediate satisfaction with the relationship, and being preordained to be with a specific person, cultivators tend to believe relationships require time and growth between both partners. Although both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, the author holds that "successful relationships evolve from the resolution of risks, challenges, and difficulties, rather than their absence" (p. 361). This aspect is important to keep in mind when assessing relationships and gaming, as destiny theorist non-playing partners may be more prone to claim that perceived excessive gaming is a sign of a doomed relationship, whereas destiny theorist players may see a partner who complains about their playing habits as a signal to move on. Relationship cultivators, on the other hand, may try to work out gaming schedules or even join the gaming world.

Current literature has recently looked at WoW and its effects on individuals, but scholars have only begun to study how this game impacts real life relationships. Considering the significance of romantic relationships for human development and socialization, examining the interaction between gaming and relationships may help to illuminate how social interaction is changing and how real life relationships are adjusting to the changes.

Theoretical Frameworks and Expectations

This study uses a social constructionist approach to explore how young adult World of Warcraft players and their partners negotiate virtual and real lives within their relationships. Social constructionism highlights “both the dynamic contours of social reality and the processes by which social reality is put together and assigned meaning” and it takes into account that individuals actively construct their everyday lives and what the world means to them (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, this framework asserts that individuals are continually organizing and creating meaning, “literally inventing rather than discovering reality” (Lyddon, 1995, p. 69). Through further interaction with others, meaning can be assigned to larger society (Lee & Greene, 1999). This conceptual framework is useful in explaining how people come to understand their romantic relationships as these interpersonal relationships are formed subjectively by their members.

Related to constructivism, the current research also draws on insights and principles from symbolic interactionist theory. First coined by Blumer (1969), this theory rests on three root assumptions: “first, that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; second that the meanings of things arise out of the process of social interaction; and third, that meanings are modified through an interpretive process which involves

self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another” (Denzin, 1992, p. xiv).

Whereas constructivism focuses on how the individual comes to understand the world around him or her, symbolic interactionism helps one understand how this individual’s interactions, in this case, with a partner, construct and reinforce particular meanings in the world and in their relationship.

In addition to the social constructivist and symbolic interactionism approaches, distributed cognition helps explain how players and their partners shape their identities in the presence of gaming and their relationship. Distributed cognition, originally coined by Edward Hutchins in the mid 1980s, is “specifically tailored to understanding interactions among people and technologies” (Hollan, Hutchins & Kirsh, 2000, p. 174) and helps contextualize the relationship and processes of interaction in the couple. Unlike other cognitive theories that seek to understand how individuals make sense of the world around them, distributed cognition believes that other individuals as well as technologies and materials in the environment contribute to how an individual creates meaning in the world around them (Acord, 2010; Hollan, Hutchins, & Kirsh, 2000). This conceptual framework potentially illustrates how the presence of WoW plays a role in helping the player and his or her partner shape their personal identities and understand the world. Most importantly, it is not assumed that other people and technology act upon an individual but all elements are seen as working together in the process of shaping understanding and identity (Hollan, Hutchins, & Kirsh, 2000). Distributed cognition also extends past personal symbolic meanings and considers “preexisting physical characteristics, the spatial relations in which they occur, the relations of power with which they are invested, their economic value, and, of course, the different symbolic meanings that may have been attributed to them by other actors” (Acord, 2010, p. 452). When attempting to understand how WoW affects

romantic relationships, this conceptual framework helps put into perspective the interactions that are occurring between the player, the game, and his or her significant other. In turn, these interactions help shape the way both parties understand their relationship and affects the way that they not only navigate between virtual life and real relationships, but how they subjectively feel about the closeness and quality of their relationship.

As previously stated, this study examined how playing WoW influences romantic relationships and how couples construct their relationships in the presence of this game. As Castronova (2005) stated, virtual worlds can cause a distance in real life relationships, romantic and otherwise, due to these people living in different “worlds”. Therefore, the researcher began this study with the expectation that with couples in which both partners play, regardless of whether they play together or not, the couple will feel closer and describe fewer problems related to WoW compared to other couples in which only one partner is a WoW player. With respect to how they construct their relationship around their virtual lives, the researcher expected that WoW could become an activity for the couple to partake in together; even if an individual did not initially play, their playing partner could spark an interest within them and the game could become a shared activity. If online gaming is comparable to living in different worlds, then having both partners engaged in WoW should help to overcome this distance. On the other hand, if one partner has chosen not to enter the player’s world, the expectation was that the relationship would experience more problems related to the non-player’s perceptions of the game and the player’s gaming habits. For example, the game might cause a distance between the couple because the player is unobservant of their partner, the non-player is insensitive about the other’s hobby, or both spend less quality time together. Because it may involve building the relationship around the player’s virtual life, WoW could become a divider in the relationship and put partners

at odds with each other. Furthermore, the non-player's perceptions of the gaming activity are likely to be significant, particularly if the game is seen as an interference with potential time spent together or if it is perceived as a "trivial" activity, a waste of time, or a distraction from more important activities and concerns. The player could also believe that their partner refuses to accept their interests, hobbies, or personality in general and feel constrained because of their partner's disapproval. This study sets out to understand how partners accommodate, adjust, or compromise when it comes to WoW and their relationship, and it explores the perceptions of the game among both partners, which are important for understanding the meanings and motivations for their actions. Chapter 3 outlines the research methods utilized to answer these research questions.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

This chapter summarizes the methods used to guide this study and collect the necessary data. For the sake of organization, this chapter is separated into the following sections: (1) research design; (2) sample and sampling selection; (3) data collection; and (4) data analysis.

Research Design

As discussed in the literature review, this study utilized three frameworks to approach the question of how couples interpret and negotiate the influence of World of Warcraft (WoW) in their relationships: symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and distributed cognition. Using these theories allows for a deeper appreciation for how couples come to understand their relationships in relation to the game by focusing on how research participants subjectively view their world and negotiate their relationship with the game and with each other. These theories also help to explain how couples accommodate virtual life in the presence of real life.

Due to the relative novelty of research involving the negotiation of real and virtual lives and the need to hear individuals' personal stories and interpretations about gaming life, qualitative research provided the best means of collecting information for this exploratory study (Heyink & Tymstra, 1993). Through qualitative research, in-depth interviews were uniquely well suited for eliciting accounts of how respondents viewed their relationships and how social game playing influenced their relationships. This method also allowed for interviewees to communicate how they saw their relationship in further detail by permitting follow-up questions that would help further elucidate and clarify the nature of these relationships.

This exploratory study also required a qualitative approach in order to explore the questions that should be asked in further studies of social gaming and relationships. While qualitative research provides data high in validity, quantitative research later on could provide information higher in reliability and generalizability which would allow researchers to compare the population of this study to other populations and test causal questions regarding the potential positive and negative influences of gaming in relationships (Bryman, 1984).

Sample, Sample Selection, and Recruitment

The Sample

Because this study attempts to understand how World of Warcraft players and their partners negotiated virtual life and romantic relationships, the unit of analysis was the couple. The importance of studying the couple rests on the fact that these people are forming their reality in a combined manner. According to Berger and Kellner (1964), “one will also want to understand how [relationships] are subjectively perceived and experienced...[because] every relationship...requires a process by which subjectively experienced meanings become objective to the individual and...become common property and thereby massively objective” (p. 5). Each partner’s definition of reality is being “continually correlated with the other” and agreed upon by both partners through interaction (1964, p. 10). If only one person from a couple is interviewed, then only half of that couple’s reality is being collected. As the methods of social interaction have undergone changes in recent years, it is important to examine how both members of the couple perceive and use new technologies which may enhance social interaction or pull couples apart. This study examined how couples managed their real lives in relation to their virtual ones and how they responded or adapted to these changes.

In order to gather rich and diverse stories, eleven heterosexual couples were recruited to participate in this study via fliers, WoW, and snowball sampling. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, including non-heterosexual couples would have presented complicating dynamics that would be outside the scope of the study. In order to retain a similar social context among participants, only couples with at least one partner currently enrolled in a higher educational institution were considered. Because this study concerned young adults, the ages of participants ranged from 19 to 28. Male participants were between 21-28 years old while females ranged from 19-24.

The sample was mostly homogenous with regard to race-ethnicity. Among the 22 participants, there were two Hispanic and one black interviewee, all of whom were women. The remaining 19 participants identified as white. The minimal racial diversity may reflect the demographic characteristics of WoW players. In a 2008 study on gamer profiles based on the 2004 MMO Everquest 2, a precursor to WoW, 87.6% of US players identified as white, whereas black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native American accounted for less than 4% each (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). Thus, the racial-ethnic homogeneity may reflect larger patterns among players in the general population.

The socioeconomic status of the participants was assessed using self-perceived social class status. Participants were asked to choose from the following four categories: working class, lower middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. Because most participants were unsure about their social class due to their age and, in turn, dependency on their parents, they were asked to base their answer on their family's social class. In instances where participants still were not sure about their social class, they were asked their parents' occupations and a decision was made based on this information. With the exception of upper class, each social class was

represented in the sample with five participants identifying as working class, eleven as lower middle class, and six as upper middle class. In addition, many participants also held jobs, with five working part time and eight working full time. The remaining nine did not have a job at the time of the interview.

With regard to education, fifteen of the 22 participants were actively enrolled in a higher education institution and each couple had at least one partner enrolled at the time of the interview with the exception of one couple where both partners had recently graduated with Master's degrees. Of those who were actively enrolled, five were pursuing an Associate's degree, eight a Bachelor's degree, and two a Master's degree. With the remaining five participants, two had completed Bachelor's degrees, one had attended college in the past and planned to enroll again, one was in the process of enrolling for the first time, and one had not pursued further schooling since completing his high school diploma.

In addition to the 11 couples, two WoW players acting as key informants were also utilized in order to better understand gaming culture and to understand how to ask questions in a non-offensive manner. As previously mentioned, WoW is a huge universe with rich folklore, slang, and rules of etiquette, so it would have been difficult to talk with seasoned players without the help of informants who were willing to walk through the various nuances of the game-world. The method used to recruit these informants will be discussed later but generally these were people who exhibited an interest in this study and agreed to offer help and advice about the game throughout the research process.

Recruitment

Research participants were recruited using fliers, snowball sampling, and the game itself. Fliers were posted around the University of Florida main campus and the Santa Fe College main campus announcing the need for couples in which at least one partner played World of Warcraft and was interested in participating in an interview. Those interested could respond to the flier via e-mail. Once an e-mail was received from an interested person, eligibility was determined based on whether they were in the correct age range, lived in Florida, and at least one partner played WoW and was enrolled in higher education. They were also asked if their partner would be able to participate in an interview. If they were eligible and interested, an interview time and place were scheduled.

Other participants were recruited directly through the game. In these cases, the two key informants searched for players, mostly from within their group of friends who met the criteria and contacted them about participating. Interested persons were given the researcher's e-mail address. This was not a widely popular method because finding eligible people living in Florida in a game played by millions of people worldwide was like finding a needle in a haystack. However, this figurative haystack did yield one couple that was willing to participate in an interview.

Snowball sampling was by far the most successful method. Participants were asked if they knew other couples that would be interested in being involved in an interview following their own participation. The participant was asked to contact the couple they had referred to inform them about the study. Since some people were not comfortable sharing their friends' e-mail addresses, participants were asked to relay the researcher's e-mail address to their friends

when informing them about the study. Once the referred couple contacted the researcher they were informed about the purpose of the study, how the interviews were conducted, and asked whether they would like to be involved. If the referred couple still showed an interest, then they began the interviewing process based on whether they were able to complete a face-to-face or online interview. One participant was involved in a local live action role playing (LARP) club and was able to refer multiple couples who fit the demographic needed for the study since many LARPerS also are interested in online role playing games like WoW. In addition to this individual, other couples were able to direct the researcher to friends that would be willing to help. About half of the couples were recruited using snowball sampling.

Participants in face-to-face interviews were asked to choose the interview setting to ensure their comfort. Most participants chose to meet at a local coffee shop but three participants chose to hold the interviews in the comfort of their own homes. In the end, the most important element of the setting for interviews was the respondent's comfort in order to insure open communication. Once a location for the interview was chosen, respondents were asked to read, sign, and date the informed consent form prior to beginning the interview. They were then given a copy of the informed consent form for their personal records and the interview process began.

Two key informants were recruited from among study participants. Participants who seemed open to being involved and were very knowledgeable about WoW were asked if they were willing to maintain open communication throughout the study as a key informant and were asked to sign a consent form acknowledging their involvement.

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face but five interviews were conducted online using Skype, a free program that allows people to talk in real time over the internet. These

people were also from Florida but lived outside of the Gainesville area. Two couples, who were recommended by other participants, lived outside of Gainesville. However with one couple, one partner lived in the area while the other did not. Prior to these online interviews, interested people were given more information including the type of questions that would be asked, the online communication software that would be used to conduct the interviews, and how long the interview was expected to last. After agreeing to participate, the individual was asked to inform their partner about the study and ask if they would like to participate. When both partners agreed to the interview, they were both asked for their e-mail addresses in order to send a copy of the informed consent form to them and to ask what time and day would be best to conduct the interview. They were then informed in the e-mail that their response agreeing to the interview and the time and day they were available for the interview served as their consent. However, as stated in the consent form, they were still free to withdraw this consent at any time. Once they replied to the e-mail agreeing to participate and when they were available, the interviews were conducted using Skype.

While social desirability bias was not a big concern in the interviews, a few people did make comments exhibiting concern of being “way off base” about their opinions on the game. In these instances these people were assured that their opinion was what was needed and that there was no way they could be wrong (Nancarrow & Brace, 2000). Questions were also worded to reflect neutrality and not steer respondents towards a “right” answer (2000).

Data Collection

Using semi-structured interviews, specific aspects of relationships and the gaming culture were addressed using an interview guide (see Appendix A). By using this method, the most

central questions pertaining to this study were addressed while still giving the participant the freedom to comment on other facets they deemed important and appropriate. Such flexibility was vital to the study considering that there is very little information concerning social gaming and romantic relationships. This method allowed for a greater rapport with participants and higher comfort level, leading to more intimate and rich details on how couples negotiated virtual life in their romantic relationships.

Interview sessions lasted between forty minutes and an hour and forty minutes, depending on the participant's openness and willingness to share. Regardless of length, each participant provided thorough answers to the questions that elicited personal stories. Because this study sought to understand how romantic couples constructed meaning in their relationships, both partners were interviewed. Out of concern that answers to some questions could provoke adverse reactions from their partners or lead the participants to hold back truthful responses, partners were interviewed separately and assured that none of their answers would be shared with the other party. Interviews with each partner were generally conducted successively in order to reduce the chance of couples coordinating or exchanging responses, but there were two couples whose interviews were conducted a few days apart because of schedule conflicts; however, these couples' answers did not seem to be affected by the time difference and mostly mirrored other couples who were interviewed successively.

Couples in which both partners played World of Warcraft or only one person played were recruited and interviewed. Two versions of the interview guide were used: one version for WoW players and a second, modified version for non-playing partners (see Appendix A). Among the eleven couples interviewed, five couples consisted of two WoW players while the remaining six couples included only one partner that played WoW. Among these six couples with only one

playing partner, five were made up of playing male/non-playing female and one couple consisted of a playing female and non-playing male.

Two concerns at the start of the study pertained to whether young men might be more reluctant to participate and how to assure participants of the anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews. The unwillingness of male interviewees to discuss intimate details about their relationships has been described by other researchers (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; Pineiro-Escoriaza, J.C., 2009; Nunkoosing, 2005). However, this problem was minimized by using personal stories during the interviews in order to put respondents at ease. Generally, female partners showed more of an initial interest in participating but male partners also contacted this researcher and did not pose much difficulty when scheduling interviews. In order to put participants at ease that their identities would not be compromised, anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Any instance where the participant's name was mentioned was replaced with an alias during the transcription. The recordings, which were only accessible to the researcher, were erased after transcripts were completed. If the name of the participant's character from WoW was mentioned in the interview, this was also altered along with any other identifying aspects mentioned in the interview.

Data Analysis

In order to understand patterns in the data, the interviews were analyzed by qualitatively identifying themes that emerged using grounded theory and coding. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe the process of coding as the "heart and soul of whole-text analysis" (p. 274). Upon completing each interview, the main themes that emerged during the interview were summarized in "memos"; this allowed the researcher to recognize whether these main themes were unique to

the interview or if a pattern was present among other interviews and to create reminders of themes that emerged during the interviews (Burnard, 1991; Miles & Huberman, 1999). After transcription was complete, the interviews were read through again to “become more fully aware of the ‘life world’ of the respondent” and understand their “frame of reference” (Burnard, 1991, p. 462). During this reading, notes were made on the emerging themes found in the interview. The final step of analysis was to read the transcriptions a final time and give all relevant content a heading using the program NVIVO 9 (Burnard, 1991). During these steps of identifying themes and assigning headings, six questions from Berkowitz (1997) were kept in mind:

1. What common themes emerge in responses about specific topics? How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to illuminate the broader central question(s) or hypotheses?
2. Are there deviations from these patterns? If so, are there any factors that might explain these deviations?
3. How are participants' environments or past experiences related to their behavior and attitudes?
4. What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How do they help illuminate the central question(s) or hypotheses?
5. Do any of these patterns suggest that additional data may be needed? Do any of the central questions or hypotheses need to be revised?
6. Are the patterns that emerge similar to the findings of other studies on the same topic? If not, what might explain these discrepancies (Berkowitz, 1997)?

After all themes in the interviews were given headings, similar headings were grouped together and collapsed into broader categories while repetitious categories were removed in order to produce a final list of themes found within the interviews (Burnard, 1991). Keeping in mind this study's unit of analysis, the couple's interviews were also cross-analyzed and matching and divergent themes between partners were also categorized. Bogdan and Biklin (1998) point out many common themes that tend to emerge in qualitative interviews, and

while this list is not exhaustive and not all of these categories were present in the data, their list was a useful starting point in understanding what to look for within the data:

1. Setting/Context codes: provide background information on the setting, topic, or subjects.
2. Defining the situation codes: categorize the world view of respondents and how they see themselves in relation to a setting or the topic.
3. Respondent perspective codes: capture how respondents define a particular aspect of a setting.
4. Respondents' ways of thinking about people and objects codes: capture how they categorize and view each other, outsiders, and objects.
5. Process codes: categorize sequences of events and changes over times.
6. Activity codes: identify recurring informal and formal types of behavior.
7. Event codes: directed at infrequent or unique happenings in the setting or lives of respondents in contrast to activity codes).
8. Strategy codes: relate to ways people accomplish things
9. Relationship and social structure codes: tell you about alliances, friendships, and adversaries as well as about more formally defined relations such as social roles.
10. Method codes: identify your research approaches, procedures, dilemmas, and breakthroughs (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998).

Using the list of categories emerging from the interviews, material in the transcripts was coded according to these categories; content from the same categories was grouped together in a single document again with the use of NVIVO 9 qualitative analysis software. However, the original documents were retained in order to ensure that context was not lost (Burnard, 1991). After all relevant interview material was grouped into one of the categories the write-up process finally began. Relevant categories are addressed in the following chapters and exemplified with parts of the various interviews to illustrate the themes.

Method Limitations and Insider/Outsider Research

This chapter has focused on providing a clear picture to readers regarding the research design, sample and sampling selection, data collection, and data analysis to provide transparency. This concluding section addresses two additional concerns about the study: its limitations and the researcher's place in the research. In its use of in-depth interviews from a small convenience sample, the current study can provide a rich account of the perceptions and processes involved among couples, but its results cannot be generalized to the larger population. The couples involved in this study were chosen out of convenience, and they may differ from those who did not volunteer to participate and vary in unknown ways. There is also a question whether couples shared as much information as they could. Since the majority of interviews were face-to-face, individuals may have felt shy, unwilling, or offended when it came to sharing certain information and may have withheld some facts or opinions. Information could have also been suppressed if it was felt to be undesirable to the interviewer regardless of attempts to maintain a neutral stance. These caveats and limitations are important for understanding and interpreting these data.

Additionally, it is necessary to understand this researcher's position as both an insider and outsider in the study. According to Bartunek and Louis (1996), there are both outsiders and insiders when it comes to a setting under study. They defined insiders as those who viewed the setting being researched as "a source of greater and more enduring consequences in terms of economic security, social affiliation, self-esteem, challenge, and fulfillment," (1996, p. 3). Outsiders, on the other hand, are comparable to visitors whose "consequential settings" were in another place (1996, p. 3). Outsiders enter the setting that is being studied to collect data and then return to their own setting with the findings to inform the general public. Although this researcher does intend to disseminate the research results, the gaming setting also holds special

meaning, placing the researcher in more of an insider position. The interest in studying World of Warcraft and couples originated from this researcher's observations of her partner playing the popular game. Never having come into contact with online gaming in previous relationships, the game soon became a new component of the relationship to understand. It differed from console gaming due to its massive multiplayer abilities which meant that events happened in real-time unlike console gaming where games could be put on pause. This researcher wondered if other couples had encountered as unique an experience when shaping a romantic relationship in the presence of WoW. For instance, prior to becoming acquainted with the game through her partner, the researcher only had common stereotypes of WoW players to relate to, which were mostly negative. After seeing her partner play WoW often, she began to dislike the game because of the lack of attention to other matters her boyfriend seemed to have. Eventually, after talking at length about the game with him and playing herself, the game changed from being a "black hole for boyfriends" to an entertaining pastime just like any other hobby. With these insights, the researcher felt that she would be better prepared to understand both players and non-players having occupied both of these positions in her own relationship. With this information, this researcher set out to answer how other couples perceived this virtual realm and how they chose to navigate it within the context of their relationship.

CHAPTER 4 PERCEPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT

In this chapter the results of the twenty-two interviews are discussed, beginning with the sample characteristics. In the next section of this results chapter, there are three areas covered which will ultimately lay the foundation for answering the research question. The first area focuses on the perceptions of World of Warcraft from both playing and non-playing partners. This includes the concerns individuals have about addictive playing habits, general opinions, and motivations for playing the game. The second section looks at the common activities that individuals share with their partners, whether those activities include WoW or are unrelated to the game. This section is important since some of these activities do seem to have a connection to how partners react to the game and what kind of role it plays in the relationship. The final part of this chapter discusses the connections (or disconnections) between the virtual realm and real-life. This includes information on whom players interact with in the game, whether they are real life friends or people known solely online, how they play the game, and whether their partners know who they play with. This section is meant to be a bridge between the foundation that was built in the previous sections and the final results in Chapter 6 which is focused on the real world effects of the virtual realm on romantic relationships.

Sample Characteristics

Among the eleven couples, the length of their relationships ranged from eleven months to nine years with an average of slightly over three years. Most couples had met through a mutual friend when they were between the ages of 15 and 21 with female partners being slightly younger. However, three of the male partners were slightly older than 21 when they met their significant others.

Six couples lived together at the time of the interview, with two couples planning to move in together before the end of the year. Among the remaining three couples not living together, there were no immediate plans to move in together. Five couples were engaged at the time of the interview, while five couples were monogamously dating. One couple was not formally engaged but planned to be betrothed when the female partner completed her bachelor's degree. With the exception of one male, none of the participants had previously been married and none of the participants had children from their current or past relationships.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, five couples consisted of two WoW players while the other six couples included a player and a non-playing partner. Players were defined by their self-reported claims that they played WoW regardless of the amount of time spent playing. A subgroup of players consisted of ex-players who did not have an active account at the time of the interview. However, they were still interviewed as players due to their general willingness to play again at some point and their continuing possession of a character in the game, even though their account was not active. Among the sixteen players, there were five ex-players.

Non-players were classified as participants who may have tried playing a short trial of WoW at some point but did not play the game for whatever reason. To further clarify, non-playing partners who had tried playing at some point were denoted as non-playing/played trial, or NP/PT for short. For non-playing partners who have never played on a trial basis, these interviewees were identified as non-playing/never played, or NP/NP. Among non-playing partners in general, three were classified as NP/PT and the remaining three were NP/NP.

“It’s Just a Silly Game”: Player and Partner Perceptions of World of Warcraft

Before attempting to explain how World of Warcraft and romantic relationships interact, this section explores the participants’ perceptions concerning WoW from both player and non-player viewpoints. Attitudes about the game represent an important context for understanding the meanings and negotiations concerning WoW and how it may impact relationships. These perceptions will later be tied into how the game affects relationships. This first section sets out specifically to explore the topics of addiction, playing motivation, and general opinions of WoW, and in the process provides a clear picture of how the people interviewed understand the game. Most importantly, the foundation of the research question is established.

World of Warcraft and the Concern of Addiction

Players and their significant others are no strangers to the stigma associated with WoW. Online gaming in general has been on the receiving end of negative press in recent years, with stories about parents neglecting their own children while gaming, and of exhaustion-related deaths in players (Hartvig, 2010). This perspective emphasizes the potential of online gaming has the potential to become an obsession and lead to serious addiction. Although questions regarding addiction were not included in the interviews, nearly every respondent commented on the subject without prompting. Among participants, addiction to WoW was defined as playing to the point where the game interfered with real world obligations, such as job or school commitments, and being unable to control the amount played. While not all players recognized themselves as currently or previously addicted, the concept remained a very real possibility to some. In the following quotes, players discussed incidents of excessive playing among people they knew:

On the loading screen for WoW it says, “spend time with your friends in Azeroth but make sure you spend time with them outside.” People don’t take that warning to heart, I know people who won’t take phone calls, they won’t talk to people for weeks at a time because they’re playing WoW...I want to be able to put it down and be like, “I want to go out and eat with my friends” and go. I don’t want to have to say, “No, I can’t go, I have a raid.” It sounds silly. (John, 28, player)

Literally every time I have been to my friend’s house he’s either playing WoW or he might be playing another game that he just got. It’ll be 20 or 30 minutes before he goes back to WoW. (Amelia, 24, ex-player)

I think it was last semester and the semester before, [my roommate’s] grades went down the toilet. All she did was WoW. She even had to stop because her boyfriend, or fiancée at the time, broke up with her because of it. It was really bad, she got obsessed. (Sparrow, 21, player)

In the above quotes, players addressed their concerns about addiction among people they were close to. These examples demonstrate that because of the negative effects of WoW on people around them, addiction was an ongoing anxiety among those currently involved in WoW. These participants illustrated how personally knowing someone who had dealt with excessive playing and experiencing this from the outside helped them recognize not only the possibility of addiction but the irrationality of becoming so captivated by the game. Problems such as poor grades, deteriorating friendships, and a disregard for those around them became more than just an impersonal stereotype for these players because they had seen this occur within their own circle of friends. Interestingly enough, in the first quote John mentions one of the many excerpts from the game’s loading screen, which typically provides tips on playing WoW. However, this advice is an instance where the game itself admonishes players not to neglect real world responsibilities. From this, it is clear to see that Blizzard, the parent company of WoW, also sees addiction as a potential risk and burden among some of its players. As illustrated by the above quotes, the game was not considered inherently addictive by nature but there was a risk that some players could become addicted. That is, in the event of an addiction to playing, participants

viewed the player as at fault and not the game. This belief was held by all players and most non-playing partners:

I'm an addict...recovering addict and I'm addicted to something that not that many people would think of as an addictive substance. It's food. If you can become addicted to something you physically need to survive you start to think you can become addicted to anything and it's not necessarily the substance. You don't demonize the substance anymore because like with food it still serves a purpose. It's just that some people can handle it better than others. I think it's the same as anything else that can be addictive which are most things. (Amy, 24, NP/PT)

I think it's just one of the addictions a susceptible person chooses. Whether it's alcohol, adrenalin, WoW, or [sleeping with] as many girls as possible, you know. You have to be susceptible to be a proper addict of either...it doesn't bother me that anyone plays, but I firmly believe people should be able to control their addictions, whatever they may be. (Vanessa, 20, ex-player)

Here, participants compare the game to other objects or activities that do not necessarily cause problems if taken in moderation. Although people could become dependent participants felt that these substances or activities should not be demonized since the person ultimately had control over their actions. In addition, participants felt that becoming addicted depended on the type of person involved or that some people could handle the game better, still maintaining that WoW was not a culprit in addiction and instead how disciplined the person playing was. However, even if an individual was susceptible to a WoW addiction they were still expected to control their addictions.

Although the majority of people felt that excessive playing was a weakness of the player and not a characteristic of WoW, one participant, a NP/NP partner, felt that a person's status had no bearing on whether they became addicted and the game was not completely exempt from blame:

One of my father's friends married a dermatologist, obviously someone who is extremely well educated and involved in society and he, the dermatologist, ended up losing his house and his wife and his kids because he would skip surgery to go play WoW...so it could be

some parts of the game, I don't think there's necessarily a stereotype of who gets addicted...I say it's a mixture of both the game and the player. (Tanya, 22, NP/NP)

Although Tanya's view was a minority and only held among NP/NP partners, there were some people who saw WoW as partially guilty in causing addiction among its players. As illustrated by Tanya, individuals who seemed like they should be immune to gaming addictions fell into excessive playing habits as well, making it seem like interactions with WoW could cause addictive behavior. Again, it should be noted that this belief was only held by NP/NP partners. This could be due to their unfamiliarity (or skepticism) with regard to the game or their ability to notice symptoms of gaming addiction from a distance; regardless, the assumption that WoW interacts with the player will later tie in with how the game impacts the relationship.

As previously discussed, most players knew someone who played WoW excessively and this allowed them to vicariously understand the danger of addiction. Since all players felt that it was their personal duty to control how much they played, the personal knowledge of someone who struggled with excessive playing was an example of what not to do. However, two participants had dealt with their own addiction to the game in the past. In a previous relationship, John attempted to make WoW a shared experience as his fiancée at the time also played. By playing together he hoped that they could bond in the virtual realm in addition to the real world, especially since they collectively played about 100 hours per week. However, a combination of her competitive nature and his attempt to use the game as an escape from his unhappy relationship resulted in obsessive playing that damaged the relationship instead of strengthening it:

I wasn't happy with my life at all. I wasn't happy with the person I was with and I was trying to make it better through a shared experience that just made it more miserable so the more I tried to escape the more it became a problem and then it started affecting other areas of my

life like my job and my relationship and things like that. The more I strove to get away from it the worse it got...when my ex told me we were splitting up I walked in the room and was like “ok cool” and I went and played WoW. I wish that was an exaggeration but it isn’t.
(John, 28, player)

Since this event, John has drastically cut back on WoW after realizing that his excessive playing led him to disregard problems in his life. In turn, this disregard led to his problems worsening, resulting in further attempts at escapism through gaming. Essentially, WoW became both a cause and a symptom of real life problems.

In the second incidence of WoW addiction, Zack discussed a previous marriage. He married a woman he met through a live action role-playing club (LARP) at the age of nineteen and aided in raising her children from a previous relationship. Three years later he sought a divorce after becoming an excessive player because of the neglect he felt from his wife:

I always found myself being the one that made dinner, cleaned up, took care of her kids [from her previous partner], helped them with their homework, and she would never do any of that. So I got to a breaking point, I guess, where I didn’t want to do any of that anymore. I just wanted to come home and ignore her because she was the source of that frustration. That’s when I started playing WoW a lot more. I would work overnight, come home, get some sleep, go to class, come home, get something to eat, plopp right down in my chair, and just play WoW until I had to go to sleep so that I could go to work the next day. (Zack, 26, ex-player)

Similar to John, Zack began playing excessively when he was confronted with a poor relationship situation. He felt neglected, underappreciated, and frustrated and saw WoW as a way to escape from his circumstances, playing WoW in turn led to more severe issues since existing problems were ignored. Once again the game was a symptom of real life problems while simultaneously becoming a cause of bigger problems. Zack eventually stopped playing WoW and tried other MMORPGs in moderation soon after beginning his current relationship with Monica after she “ended up helping me identify that I had used WoW as an escape from the

problems of my personal life for so long that it was a trained behavior” (Zack, 26, ex-player). Although Zack began playing other games he took care to control how much time he spent playing so he would not repeat his mistakes. It is important to note that neither player who struggled with excessive playing directly blamed the game but referred to it as a way to “escape” from unpleasant conditions. They either reduced their playing time or moved on to similar games, illustrating that even in cases where addiction became a reality players still did not place blame on the game but rather the circumstances around game play.

While both former self-described addicts felt that they played excessively as a way to escape from problems, many participants did not feel that playing the game for this reason was inherently negative. If playing did not interfere with real world matters, using WoW as a way to escape from a hectic work day, a busy school schedule, or even boredom was generally acceptable among both players and most non-players, mainly NP/PT partners. One player described WoW as “just a game. At the end of the day it’s a pure, delicious escapism but that’s all it is” (Jacob, 26, player). In this case the player, who had not dealt with uncontrolled playing habits, believed the game could serve as an escape from the obligations he had in the real world but also downplayed how much bearing WoW should have on a person’s life by referring to it as “just a game.” An NP/PT partner who had never experienced any issues related to his partner’s playing habits also acknowledged that the game served as, “an interesting diversion for her. You know, a distraction from real life” (Steven, 22, NP/PT). Again the game is illustrated as an object that players can use but that cannot exert any control over the player, placing responsibility solely on the player. In the two cases of addiction the participants did not believe WoW was an escape from the real world but that the addicted player was using WoW as an escape, giving the game a passive role in excessive playing habits.

So far this section has discussed the concerns and realities of addiction among players and non-players and how these can impact the way that people view the game. Considering that most participants saw playing WoW as a habit that the player was responsible for, most respondents, except for NP/NP partners, saw addiction to the game as something to be controlled by the player. Players and NP/PT partners placed a large amount of faith in players' agency over their playing habits and ignored the aspects of the game that could contribute to an addiction such as loneliness or excitement. Even though two players identified themselves as ex-addicts and demonstrated how the game exacerbated existing problems, in participants' views, WoW remained the responsibility of the player, with addiction stories serving as cautionary tales to other players. In turn, the beliefs about addiction played a part in how the participants formed their opinions about WoW, whether these were positive, neutral, or negative. These general opinions of WoW are the next topic of concern since they aid in further laying the foundation for understanding how the game impacts relationships.

General Opinions of World of Warcraft

Throughout the course of the interviewing process, it became clear that the opinion of both players and non-players of WoW set the stage for the role that the game played in the relationship. Opinions were positive, neutral, and negative but the playing status of the partner seemed to determine how a participant felt about the game. To begin, non-playing partners' opinions of WoW ranged from neutral to negative. Further separating the non-playing participants, the results showed that those who never tried playing the game, NP/NP partners had a consistently negative outlook concerning WoW. The following quotes demonstrate how NP/NP partners saw the game:

I don't think it's been a completely negative thing [but] there have been times where if I'm in the wrong mood and WoW is involved then I'll tell him "I hate WoW." (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

I also think it's kind of silly sometimes. It's really... it used to be like a gamer kind of thing but I think it sort of sold its soul. I remember one Easter time I was watching people play and they were...they turned into Easter bunnies, they had to collect eggs and I was like that's so lame, that's not gaming at all...I don't really think it's really hardcore in story or anything like that. (Tanya, 22, NP/NP)

I think it's a little bit silly. I know that one of his mounts is a tiger-like creature with wings. So when I see that, I go "oh, you have the kitty" and I tease him because he's allergic to cats. I say "can we have that kitty?" (Abby, 22, NP/NP)

From the above excerpts, NP/NP partners illustrated their negative opinions of WoW, expressing their dislike for the game or beliefs that the game was "silly." This group also demonstrated the critical outlook they had of the game as well. In the second quote, this partner called into question the merits of the game, stating that it's "lame" and they sold out in order to attract a wider audience. The last quote takes this critical outlook even further, indicating that this partner antagonized her significant other while he was playing by referring to a mythical creature as a "kitty." In general, these partners mocked WoW and, in turn, devalued the virtual world that their significant others were a part of.

Although there were only three partners interviewed who did not play WoW and never tried, one player's previous girlfriend had also never tried the game and often gave him a hassle about how often he played:

I'd ask her "are you watching this show?" "Yea." "Alright, well I'm going to play some WoW" and she'd sigh, and I was like "what is that about!?" "Didn't you just play last night?" "Yea, it's kind of one of those games you keep playing, it doesn't just end." She would always just push it and make it seem like I didn't care about her enough...she just thought it was [stupid]. (Seth, 22, player)

The disagreement over Seth's playing habits was not the primary reason given for the eventual break up but he felt that his interest in WoW was something she never understood and never attempted to understand. Similar to the previous NP/NP partners, Seth's previous partner was critical of the game, believing that it was a waste of time, and she diminished the value of the virtual nation that Seth believed the game provided to players.

Similar to NP/NP partners, NP/PT partners had a difficult time in seeing WoW in a positive light. The difference between these two groups, however, was that NP/PT partners held a generally neutral outlook. One partner originally had a pessimistic view of the game as an object that detracted her fiancé's attention from her, but after learning more about the game and realizing that her partner would prioritize her before WoW she developed a more neutral stance:

I just kind of said something when he was sitting there and he turns around and looks at me and says "I haven't been paying much attention to you, have I?" and he comes over and kisses me and starts cuddling with me... but I know I had to realize that the game wasn't stealing him and at the same time I had to realize it was ok for him to have his fun. He didn't have to spend all his time with me. (Amy, 24, NP/PT)

This partner had started with a critical approach when she felt that she had to compete for attention with the game but eventually shifted to an impartial position concerning the game. While her partner aided in this shift by assuring her that the game did not take priority over her, while playing the game for herself may have helped her to accept that WoW was nothing to worry about. The other NP/PT partners did not discuss any previous instances where they saw WoW as a negative and they all maintained a neutral outlook on the game. After trying WoW for a short time they felt that this particular game was not their "style", choosing other types of video games over WoW. Overall, these partners saw WoW as a game their partner enjoyed and nothing further. With regard to the impact this could have on a relationship, the game itself held no value

for these partners; it was neither a positive nor negative influence on the player. Because of this, the way the player interacted with the game (e.g. how much time the player spent and how time and attention were negotiated with the non-playing partner) was given more weight than the game itself by the partner. This interaction is what would ultimately shape how NP/PT partners understood their relationship in terms of the game unlike the more critical NP/NP partners who took both their partner and the game into account.

Among the sixteen people interviewed who said they actively played at the time of the interview or did in the past, four players held a neutral opinion of WoW. Interestingly, three out of the four neutral players had experienced problems because of their playing habits, two of whom claimed they had been addicted at one point. John, who used to play excessively alongside his previous partner, believed WoW aggravated the problems but also believed WoW aided in ending a hopeless relationship:

Once we separated we both realized we were unhappy. Once we found other things, WoW took a backseat to them. In this case it was where both people were trying to escape and neither one realized it and once they did their lives changed. So it was a good thing. (John, 28, player)

In his previous relationship, John had identified WoW as a problem. He recognized that he was playing more often and that problems in other parts of his life began to emerge. However, it was not until after he and his previous partner separated that they both realized that the game may have led to other problems and that the excessive playing was first and foremost a symptom of their unsatisfactory relationship. Another neutral player, who had not logged on for over a year, stopped playing when a friend expressed concern that she was “prioritizing the guild and raiding to being with her and other friends in real life” (Vanessa, 20, ex-player). However, she saw WoW as something that the player should control and harbored no resentment towards her fiancé

who continued to actively play. Even though these people had played or currently played WoW, they maintained a neutral stance. For some, this could be because of their history with playing excessively and placing more bearing on how a person played than the game itself, similar to NP/PT partners. In addition, even though these players had experienced the virtual realm in depth, they placed much less value on their virtual life in comparison to the real world, as evidenced by either quitting or reducing the amount they played. This prioritization could change how the game affected their relationship in contrast to players who placed more value in the virtual realm than neutral players.

Although four players had an impartial outlook concerning WoW, the remaining twelve saw the game in a more positive light. This group of players did not include anyone who felt they became addicted at any time, though three ex-players were included, two of whom quit because of heavier class loads in school. The remaining ex-player quit because his fiancée stopped playing and he no longer had her as a WoW partner. One player discussed her enjoyment of WoW and her positive opinion of WoW but she, like many players, expressed a reoccurring concern of becoming too absorbed in the game:

I've played for hours, like the whole day has been lost in time, but in normal conditions I'm just like "OK, I can't do this for that long I have other things to do, hanging out with people"...so...I like it, I do like it overall. (Michelle, 21, ex-player)

Again, addiction is brought up as an undesired possibility, but regardless, these ex-players still maintained a positive opinion of the game. This quote also echoes a previous point that the game was perceived as something that the player must control, as evidenced through Michelle's own inner dialogue advising herself to only play for a short amount so she could accomplish other tasks in the real world.

Concerning other positive opinions, one ex-player felt that his fiancée, also an ex-player, still favored WoW stating, “She loves it! She can’t get enough of it! I think she would play if it wasn’t for school” (Jimmy, 25, ex-player) once again demonstrating not only a positive opinion of the game but the need to control playing in the presence of real-life. The general sentiment among players, with the exception of ex-players, was that if they did not have a positive opinion and found the game problematic they would not play it. Relating this back to the common addiction concern among most players, these players essentially saw the burden of control as their responsibility, like neutral players, but regardless of this the virtual life of the game was a positive in their lives.

When it comes to an individual’s opinion towards WoW, the general theme is that players who have never struggled with obsessive playing generally viewed the game in a positive light. Those who had this problem in the past, however, claimed neutral ground. Those who never classified themselves as players were split evenly between having a neutral and negative opinion of WoW. However, those non-players who had a neutral view of WoW had also attempted to play the game before ultimately deciding it was not something that interested them. Those with a negative perception, however, never played the game. This could possibly mean that playing even for a short time can give non-players a better insight into WoW and why their partner has an interest in the game. A neutral perception could mean that these partners, given that they had tried playing, were more open to the virtual world of WoW. Regardless of the reason, it seems that even a small effort at playing can change a partner’s stance on the game or reflect a greater effort to understand a player’s experiences and point of view. The next section explored the purposes for playing, whether real or perceived, that further illuminated how players and non-players understand the game and come to their personal conclusions.

Real and Perceived Motivations for Playing

Just as participants' opinions of WoW played a part in understanding how the game affects a romantic relationship, the motivations for playing also reveal the meanings of the game in the context of relationships. Looking at the reasons players enjoy WoW can shed light on how important their virtual life is in relation to their real life. The reasons that non-playing individuals give for their partner's playing can also show how much impact they believe the virtual realm has on their partner. These motivations, both real and perceived, build upon the previous sections in laying a foundation for explaining how WoW plays a role within romantic relationships. To begin this section, the focus is on the reasons playing partners enjoy WoW. Juxtaposed with this section is what non-playing partners believe their partners' motivations are for playing WoW.

Among players, there were many different reasons given for playing WoW. Some people enjoyed the multitude of activities that the game offers, others enjoyed it for the role-playing element, and some played for the vivid folklore. Throughout the course of the interviews however, there were four main motivations behind playing WoW that stood out: pure entertainment, a sense of accomplishment, socializing with others, and a form of distraction.

For players, the most common reason for playing, which almost every player listed, was the pure entertainment of the game. With this motivation, players saw the game simply as a fun pastime. Although many players listed entertainment as a reason in conjunction with others, many players saw this as the primary reason for playing:

I like it. It's really the only game I play and I enjoy it a lot so I don't know if that makes me a nerd or not. I don't know I find it...fun, just something to do. (Sparrow, 21, player)

For Sparrow, WoW presented other motivations aside from simple fun, such as an imaginative storyline, but being entertained was at the forefront. With some players, the entertainment aspect was a “no-brainer.” When one player was asked why he enjoyed playing WoW he replied “Other than it’s fun?” (Bruce, 28, player). Similarly, many others questioned the need for any other answer besides being entertained, believing that this sufficed in explaining the game’s appeal.

However, some players felt that aside from entertainment, the game offered other opportunities. The second most common motivation for playing WoW was the sense of accomplishment the game provided, with more than a third of playing partners citing this reason. Players often discussed how they could see their progression through the game, and the pride they gained from achievements within the game was a big motivation for playing:

It’s very task-oriented so you finish something and then there will be something else. You’re always working towards a goal and I love working towards goals. I love doing that. I think that’s the major draw about it...you do feel a sense of accomplishment.
(Roxanne, 19, player)

I didn’t read the quest as usual and apparently it was a group quest. It suggested three players and it was this elite dragon, my level, and I was like “level 74, I can do this!” He killed me. I came back prepared, ate this one thing that gave me stamina and 30 critical strike and then I had this battle elixir which gave me 60 or 85 attack power and I was like ok I’m ready and I did it. I was so excited! I went back and did another 74 elite group quest on my own, I was so pumped. (Sparrow, 21, player)

Although players did not accomplish anything in the material realm, meeting goals and passing benchmarks within the virtual world elicited a sense of success that was real to them. With the above comments, the players did not draw a line between real and virtual goals. This illustrates how, regardless of whether their goals were being accomplished online or in the real world, the feeling derived from their achievement was real regardless of its origin. The second comment illustrates how many players considered these types of feats as a source of pride. For instance, although the above player was only accomplishing something in her virtual life, she outwardly

showed the excitement associated with achieving a goal within the game and strives to push the limits farther within WoW. As players often engage with real players, defeating another player could provide an even greater boost in confidence:

My favorite thing is probably PVP. I love PVP. I'm playing with some random Joe blow in Colorado and I know he's getting mad because I just killed him three times in a row. It's awesome. Not only that, I'm getting rewarded with honor points that I can buy gear with so I'm getting better not only with itemizing but I'm learning as a player how to play this class. You're getting better, you're perfecting something. (Seth, 22, player)

Once again, the above comment illustrates how players did not distinguish between real and virtual accomplishments. The player refers to defeating his opponents as “perfecting something” without categorizing his accomplishments within one of the two realms. Furthermore, since a player cannot regress when playing WoW, the game can be a source of guaranteed achievement, in contrast to the real world where there is a chance of failure; a player could face setbacks or even death within the game but come back to continue playing. Because of this difference between the real and virtual, the motivation of accomplishment can have a strong magnetic pull for players.

The third most common motivation for playing WoW was for the element of distraction. Among players, seeing the game as a distraction was generally considered a neutral motivation and was often explained as a distraction from boredom:

It gives me something to do. Like if I'm, if I don't have any class work to do, left to do, and like my friends are busy at work, it's late at night I don't have to just bother Michelle. I can occupy my time doing something on WoW. (Cody, 21, player)

An ex-player, Vanessa noted that she missed the distraction that she had previously found in playing WoW:

It was mostly annoying during spare time and nights [when I quit playing WoW]. I've struggled with insomnia for years and WoW was just something to do at night I guess. So nights when I couldn't sleep and days I didn't have anything to do were kind of hard, but other than that, it was easy. (Vanessa, 20, ex-player)

The above quotes demonstrate that although these players saw WoW as a source of distraction, the game was not viewed as interfering in more important, real world matters. In addition, Vanessa's quote above reveals her difficulty in that this former player had coping with the hole that the game left in her schedule when she stopped playing. It is important to note that this incentive was coded separately from the entertainment motivation because the narratives lacked the emphasis on diversion and fun was a defining aspect of the entertainment motivation in the other players' accounts. With the distraction motivation, players retained the outlook that playing helped them to get away from something in life, whether that was boredom or something else:

WoW has probably made me procrastinate doing other stuff that I'd rather not do but I should. But I think it's pretty selfishly motivated when it comes to video games. There's things I like better than video games so there's stuff I'm going to do instead of video games but if there are things I'd rather not do that's when WoW would get in the way. (Bruce, 28, player)

The above statement provides another example of how some players used WoW as a form of distraction from other tasks that needed to be completed. This player assured that the game had never gotten in the way of serious matters in his life, but it is easy to see how playing as a way to procrastinate could cause problems if players allowed their gaming habits to get out of hand. This was evidenced in the case of two players previously mentioned who endured relationship problems, one ending in divorce and the other resulting in a wedding cancellation. These players saw WoW as a pastime that could distract them from unsatisfactory situations in the real world even though this neglect made matters worse.

The fourth most common motivation for playing WoW was to socialize, though only three players identified this reason:

When I first started it was just leveling up, getting better gear, doing all these raids but now it's that and the social aspect. I found a guild I really like and they're my friends now, it's hanging out with them, doing things with them. It's fun. (Katie, 24, player)

Among players, both former and active, the people who cited socializing as a motivation were the few who had begun friendships through the game or other internet settings such as forums and other games. Although most players did not claim socializing as a motivation, this does not mean that they did not use WoW to socialize. However, these players mostly socialized with people they had met in the real world and were hesitant to call people they had met within the game "friends". The distinction among players who identified socializing as a purpose for playing and those who did not shows how the level of trust in online friends differed among players. How players managed their virtual lives varied, with some preferring to keep real and virtual separate (those who preferred to meet new people online) while others preferred to merge the two (those who interacted with the same people in real and virtual life).

From the points of view of non-playing partners, their perceived motivations for playing WoW included many of the same reasons that were noted by players. However players and non-players emphasized different motivations. As previously discussed, playing partners' most common reasons for playing, in descending order, were entertainment, accomplishment, distraction, and socializing. The most common reason cited among non-playing partners was socializing, which was the least common answer among players. Half of the non-players believed that using the game to socialize with others was an important attraction to their partner and did not draw a distinction between socializing with real life friends and online friends. One

partner believed her boyfriend played WoW because “through the game he feels like he can communicate more” (Abby, 22, NP/NP) while another interviewee felt that her partner enjoyed WoW because “it’s something fun and he can connect with other people” (Tanya, 22, NP/NP). It is interesting to note that among the non-playing partners who indicated that socializing was a motivation, none of their partners identified socializing as a reason for playing themselves. Another interesting fact was that only NP/NP partners cited socializing as a motivation to play WoW. This could indicate that what is considered socializing within the game is defined differently among players and non-players, particularly NP/NP partners, and can indicate another difference between the real and virtual realms. It also suggests a potential area of conflict or tension among couples with non-playing partners who had never played the game.

The second most common perceived motivation for non-players was a source of distraction. One partner felt that for her partner “it’s just a distraction...when he gets a break in work or is just bored he’ll play for another month or two” (Tanya, 22, NP/NP). For another non-player who helped her boyfriend realize he used WoW as an escape from discontent in his life, she saw the game as “a possible distraction, whether that’s from boredom or anything else going on in life” (Monica, 25, NP/PT). Among non-playing partners, viewing WoW as a distraction tended to have neutral to mildly negative connotations and the game was typically described as something their partner would do out of boredom or to procrastinate on other matters such as schoolwork. When comparing players’ motivations for playing and non-players’ perceived motivations of why their partner played, distraction was the most similar between both parties. Both players and non-players recognized how the game was capable of taking a player out of the real world and into a virtual realm. At the same time, holding similar beliefs about the game and

motivations for playing may signal greater agreement and successful navigation of their relationship between playing and non-playing partners.

Entertainment was rarely noted as a perceived motivation for playing WoW by non-playing partners, cited by only two partners. Although nearly every playing partner said that he or she played for entertainment in addition to other reasons, non-players seemed unable to see WoW as enjoyable. Only two non-players, one identified as a NP/PT and the other as NP/NP, believed their partner played for entertainment purposes. The NP/PT partner was the only male non-playing partner included in the interviews and simply referred to the game as “an interesting diversion” (Steven, 22, NP/PT) while the other non-player listed the amusement factor among other reasons her boyfriend played WoW. This could indicate that non-players have a difficult time seeing the game as a source of amusement, especially since they had chosen not to engage in WoW themselves.

One point of contention between players and non-players was the fourth motivation: a sense of accomplishment. While this reason was the second most popular among players, not a single non-player saw WoW as an activity that could evoke feelings of pride. Non-players were generally not invested in the virtual realm and seemed unable or unwilling to see how a game contained in an alternative realm could elicit emotional responses like the pride or disappointment experienced in the real world. Importantly, this inability to recognize the potential for accomplishment through the game may have contributed to negative perceptions, conflict, and devaluing of the game experience.

Thus, both players and non-playing partners cited mostly similar motivations for playing, but differences in how these motivations were prioritized and described reveal important potential areas of conflict and negotiation among couples. Players chose WoW mostly for the

entertainment factor followed by feelings of accomplishment, distraction, and socializing. However, non-playing partners were more likely to perceive their partner's play as motivated by socializing, followed by distraction and entertainment. As previously discussed non-players and players may have regarded socializing on WoW differently. Drawing a line between real world and online friends, players seemed to define socializing as engaging with people they had met through the game and not real world friends with whom they physically interacted and had established relationships. Thus, players seemed to maintain a split between the real and virtual realms in general where activities occurring within the game or the real world were relegated purely to their respective realms. Players regarded the people with whom they physically interacted as part of the physical realm, regardless of their time spent on WoW together. Non-players, on the other hand, did not make this same distinction; all interactions related to the game were considered as socializing regardless of the specific people involved. This could mean that most partners who did not play WoW have not made the distinction between the real and virtual world that their counterparts have since they do not possess a virtual self. In other words, non-playing partners were less likely to understand the game or its intricacies, so time spent with others in the game was perceived as the same, regardless of whether the people involved were known in the virtual world or were friends in the physical world.

In the same vein, non-players and players differed greatly, whether they perceived and reported accomplishment as a motivation to play. This was the only response that the majority of players gave that was never mentioned among non-playing partners. This difference between players and non-players may reflect the very different investments that individuals placed in a virtual realm. Non-players did not have this investment, so it was more difficult to relate to a feeling of pride derived from pixels and computerized fanfare. Players who had invested their

time and emotions into the game understood how much commitment certain accomplishments required and felt a very real sense of pride when they met their goals within the game.

The extent to which they saw the game as a form of entertainment was another area of difference between players and non-players. Again, this could be traced back to the real versus virtual world and a non-player's inability to relate to an virtual world. Playing partners easily found the entertainment value in WoW, usually stating that this was a glaringly obvious motivation, sometimes even comparing the amusement factor to other activities like playing basketball. Non-playing partners again were less likely to acknowledge the value in the computerized realm where the outcome within the game may have been seen as pointless or unimportant.

Both players and non-players saw distraction as a major motivation for playing WoW. However, players who used WoW as a distraction saw this purpose in a positive/neutral light, while non-players described this motivation as neutral but on the verge of negativity. The game was something players could engage in to keep their mind preoccupied and escape into an alternate reality when there were few other options. Non-players, on the other hand, saw playing WoW as a way to procrastinate when it came to school, work, or other real world matters. Essentially, players see WoW as a distraction from the real world and use it to relieve boredom while non-players believe the game is a distraction to the real world, pulling players away from reality.

In exploring both player and non-player views of WoW, including the concerns about addiction, general opinions of the game, and motivations and perceived motivations for playing, these findings point to how these perceptions could affect the relationship. Symbolic interaction and social construction theory explain that these opinions of WoW are at the heart of how these

romantic relationships are constructed and understood and perceptions play a major role in how the relationship is affected. If a partner perceives WoW as a negative activity, the way the relationship is constructed and understood could be different from someone that has a positive or neutral opinion of the game. Distributed cognition also dictates that the game itself interacts with the couple and how the relationship is constructed in the presence of this technology.

Sharing a Common Thread

With a deeper comprehension of the respondents' perceptions of World of Warcraft, the next step in this study explores how this game can (or cannot) be a common thread in a relationship. In particular, three areas are examined that illuminate the interactions surrounding WoW and other potential common interests. First, interests in video games, other massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), and miscellaneous fantasy activities are discussed. Although this section does not include WoW specifically, interests with regard to other fantasy-driven activities were often brought up in the interviews and were a common theme with players and non-players. The second section covers the attempts that players have made at getting their partners into playing WoW and whether their efforts were successful or fruitless. The final section then discusses couples who play together and the ways that they play together.

Video Games and Other Fantasy Activities

A general theme that emerged throughout the interviews was the fact that many players and non-players both enjoyed fantasy-driven activities, especially console video games. When interviewing people who played WoW, eleven out of sixteen indicated that they also played video games on consoles such as Xbox 360 and Playstation 3. These games differed from WoW in that they were not massively multiplayer game and did not occur in real-time. Although many

other video games do have options to play with multiple players, these options are on a much smaller scale and last for a short amount of time. The video games that respondents referred to were also usually played on a gaming console whereas WoW is solely played via computer. WoW and non-MMO video games typically shared a virtual fantasy and/or an adventure element, but other video games could be paused and, unless in a multiplayer environment, real players did not depend on each other.

When asking about the types of activities he engaged in with his friends, Bruce indicated that he usually preferred to stay in or go to a friend's house to play video games:

A lot of times we'll end up sitting around playing Guitar Hero. But we get together, then we'll grab dinner, we don't normally go out to bars or anything. Sometimes we do but it's pretty rare. Most times we just sit around at somebody's house and play some sort of game. (Bruce, 28, player)

Robert also listed video games as a hobby of his, stressing the control he felt he exercised in playing WoW and other games:

Gaming is a major hobby of mine. But I'd say I'm in control. Gaming is something I do in my "downtime", not something I prioritize. (Robert, 23, player)

Many other players stated that their hobbies included playing other video games besides WoW, and some even identified this as a common interest that they shared with their partner:

We play video games and watch TV shows, and go drink from time to time. We just chill...and play lots of video games. (Jimmy, 25, ex-player)

Jimmy and Amelia were not the only playing couples that enjoyed playing console games in addition to WoW; Cody and Michelle as well as Vanessa and Robert all claimed video games to be a common interest between them. Many players enjoyed video games and some non-

playing partners, particularly those who had tried WoW at some point, also noted that they enjoyed console games:

Well we're both pretty avid gamers so usually we're video gaming, like Rock Band and Mortal Kombat. (Steven, 22, NP/PT)

Although Steven was not interested in WoW, he and his girlfriend Katie were able to find common ground through various console games. For Monica, playing MMOs was not something that interested her but playing console games was an activity she frequently enjoyed and shared with her boyfriend:

I don't play anything on the computer. I like to play on the PS3, but I really don't play anything like MMOs. I like games like Fallout but if that was changed into an MMO I wouldn't play it. (Monica, 25, NP/PT)

Amy also was not interested in playing WoW with her fiancé and, in general, did not like video games. However, she did enjoy playing an old Pokémon video game, which she shared with her partner:

I'm not a big video game person. The controls tend to mess me up. I only really got into Pokémon. Part of it was because I wanted to take it away from my brother when we were back in middle and elementary school so I got good at that but that's really basic easy stuff. (Amy, 24, NP/PT)

It is important to note that aside from the majority of WoW players listing other video games as a hobby, most couples also enjoyed playing video games together even if there was a non-playing partner involved. This shows that even though a partner may not value WoW, they still share in a virtual, fantasy-driven activity with their significant other, which helps a non-playing partner better understand the appeal of WoW.

The remaining three non-players, who were also classified as NP/NP, were not interested in video games. However, Tanya talked about her past interest in video games:

I don't really play video games. I used to a lot, but when I came to college I didn't have a TV my freshman year and I didn't have a good laptop that could run any games and that just broke me of all those habits. (Tanya, 22, NP/NP)

It's important to note, however, that even though Tanya had played video games in the past, she did not see herself as a gamer and showed no interest in getting back into it at any point in the future, viewing it simply as a broken habit. Another interesting point is that the NP/NP partners were the only non-playing individuals who did not play video games and were also the only non-players who had a negative opinion of WoW. This disinterest in gaming as a whole among NP/NP partners could show that virtual life is not something that they have an interest in investing in.

LARP, or live action role playing, was another common interest among the couples. However, this may reflect the study recruitment which drew multiple people from the same LARP group. This prevalence of LARPer was a result of snowball sampling and began with an interview with an active leader of a local LARP club who referred other members. With this in mind, there were three couples that actively engaged in LARP together, two of which consisted of an NP/PT partner and one NP/NP. With Amy and Jacob, they were even planning to attend a LARP event following the interviews:

She definitely LARPs. She started doing it because of me but I'm probably the bigger fanatic of it but she plays an active part in it. And she has her own opinions and knows it just as well as me...we're LARPer. Horrible, horrible LARPer...we're basically stone cold dorks. And that's what we have in common. (Jacob, 26, player)

After meeting four years ago at a LARP event, the activity was something that Tanya and John enjoyed together for more personal reasons:

LARPing has always been a pretty constant thing in our relationship and we do that a lot. It's a fun thing to do together. Sometimes I think he LARPs too much but it's good times. It's how we met so it's a reminder every time we go. (Tanya, 22,NP/NP)

Interestingly, Richard is the only person who participates in LARP whose partner has chosen to not take part; the reason his partner gave him was that the activity was not something she was interested in. Another detail to note with LARPing is that WoW was not a common thread between the partners even if LARPing was. Among the four couples in which at least one person LARPed, all four included a non-playing partner. An important difference may be in the nature of LARP an activity that takes place in the real world and not in a virtual realm. LARP may therefore feel like a more valuable activity and more social to non-playing partners because of its medium.

With the exception of Richard and Abby, all of the couples interviewed shared an interest in fantasy-based activities, whether those were video games or LARP. As discussed previously with regard to perceptions of WoW, those people who enjoyed playing video games, regardless of whether they played WoW, were also much more likely to express either positive or neutral opinions of WoW. On the other hand, the three non-playing partners that had a negative opinion of the game, all NP/NP partners, also did not play video games and Tanya was the only one of this group that LARPed, suggesting that a lack of interest in fantasy-driven games more generally may have contributed to a dislike of WoW.

Bringing a Partner into World of Warcraft

Another common theme among couples was the attempt among players to get their partners into playing WoW. In some cases, their attempts worked:

Roxanne's actually on the same account as me. I didn't know if she would like the game at all so I'm not going to buy a whole new game and pay for a separate subscription, I just figured "ok, we'll level a character and if you like it enough you can get the game and you can transfer your character to your account." (Seth, 22, player)

Bruce had taken a break from WoW, but his partner Sparrow got him back into the game when they started dating:

She played before we were together. That's what sort of got me to play again, because I had taken a break and tried some different MMOs. Since she was playing, she was new to it and she really liked it, so I decided that I would just start back up on WoW again. So she really likes playing when she has time obviously. It's hard with school. But she got me to play and me and all my friends play on her server. (Bruce, 28, player)

Amelia reported that Jimmy was not only responsible for getting her into WoW, but he also sparked her initial interest in video games when they started dating nine years ago:

I wasn't as much of a gamer before him. I'm much more of a gamer now than I was before. I was an internet person, I was a computer person. I played barely any video games. (Amelia, 24, ex-player)

These narratives demonstrate the importance of shared time and interests among couples. The previously non-playing partners were willing to enter into their partners' virtual world through WoW to gain common ground with their partner and share this realm. By entering into the game, the way that a partner socially constructs their relationship will differ compared to non-playing partners. With this shared activity, partners better understood the time spent in WoW and their motivation to play, which could lead to fewer problems with game-play.

However, not all players were successful in getting their partner to play WoW. Some non-players eventually gave it a try by playing a demo version of the game, but ultimately decided the game was not for them:

He downloaded the demo and played it for a while. He just kind of said it wasn't his type of thing, it wasn't his game. He likes different kinds of games I guess, so it's not as fun to play...it's just not the type of game he enjoys I guess. (Katie, 24, player)

Amy explained that her fiancé asked if she wanted to try out the game but she mostly tried it on her own out of personal interest:

He tried to get me interested in it very mildly, and I picked it up out of my own curiosity because I have a lot of other friends that play it too. I created a character and played it for a few levels, but at the time our computer had a horrible lag. I couldn't stand that so I got very frustrated with the game and I'm not great at a lot of those games. (Amy, 24, NP/PT)

Amy just could not get into the game, but she also noted her sense that learning the controls and developing the dexterity needed to play the game were too difficult and decided against further play. Although these partners decided that WoW was not something that interested them, the attempt of playing gave them a small sampling of the world their partner enjoyed and contributed to how they viewed their relationship and the game, with opinions of WoW being mostly neutral compared to those who never played.

However, not all non-playing partners tried WoW. Instead, some reported having decided beforehand that the game was not something they were interested in:

He was kind of like "hey, if you started it, it would be a lot of fun because then we could do stuff together"...I'm an economics major so he always tries to convince me that I should play because WoW is its own kind of economy and that it would be only a learning experience for me...I just never had an interest. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Despite the fact that most non-playing partners simply felt that the game was not something they would be interested in trying, Abby did not see the point of video games in general:

He asked me if I wanted to play and I said no...I just have no urge and he left it at that. I think WoW is a little bit silly. I also think that SIMS game is silly, and my sister just plays that game morning to night when she is able to. It's one of those things where I just don't really play video games, so it doesn't make much sense to me. (Abby, 22, NP/NP)

Thus, decisions against taking up the game also reflected judgments and negative perceptions of the value of playing WoW.

Although many couples consisted of two WoW players, their levels of interest and investment in the game varied. Some partners could not bring themselves to invest their time into the game. Some partners gave WoW a chance before eventually turning it down in favor of other activities, but others preferred to avoid the game altogether, instead expressing that they regarded the game was uninteresting or ridiculous. Thus, non-playing partners who had played WoW on a trial basis tended to have either a positive or neutral opinion, whereas those partners who had never played WoW expressed neutral to negative perceptions. They were more likely to note that the game was not something they were interested in, and they reported difficulty understanding why others could become so heavily engaged in this virtual realm. These observations suggest that navigating between real and virtual lives may be more difficult when a non-playing partner has little experience with or interest in the virtual realm.

Playing Together

While some partners could not understand the appeal of WoW, others not only played willingly but joined alongside their partner to take part in various activities like dungeons, quests, or raids:

We would both harvest something specific in an area, like I'd go around and do the mines and he'd go around and get something else so we'd be collecting two items in bulk that we needed or that we can sell. We would definitely go on dungeons and the big things where you had to get a group of people. I think those were the heroics. When we were playing Wintergrasp we were on that as soon as it was open, we were always there. (Amelia, 24, ex-player)

This cooperation within the game between partners was a way to connect in both the real and virtual worlds. Amelia and her fiancé, who lived together, would play side by side and often verbally coordinate their actions within the game, effectively merging their game and real lives.

In Bruce and Sparrow's relationship, which was a long distance relationship at the time of the interview, playing WoW was seen as a positive activity:

WoW is something we get to do and it doesn't feel like we're so far apart and that's the thing I value most about getting to play WoW with her. It's something we get to actually do together, not just talking. We can talk on the game too when we want to so it's really nice to be able to actually do something together. (Bruce, 28, player)

Since this couple was not able to connect in the physical world because of geographic distance, they seemed to bridge the distance by sharing a virtual life. Although they felt it was not the same as real-life, playing WoW together made the physical distance less jarring. They could share the game and engage in a hands-on activity together rather than just talking on the phone or online. In this instance, the major influence of the game in constructing the relationship is evident. According to the distributed cognition theory, the interaction between the individuals and technology has greatly contributed to the construction of meaning in their relationship and virtual life definitely had real implications, in this case, the maintenance of a romantic relationship

However, having a common interest in WoW was not always positive. John and his previous girlfriend played WoW together and collectively logged over 100 hours per week, which eventually led to serious problems:

It brought out a sense of competitiveness out of her. She's a very competitive person so it became "I can do better than you" and I'm not that way, I don't care. If you're better than me, awesome for you...she had this obsession that she had to be better and it stopped me from playing the character. I was making another because I didn't want to be in competition with her and it just pissed her off more. The more competitive she got the more spiteful I got and it just spiraled out of control. And then once we stopped paying attention to our relationship and we started paying more attention to [the game] other problems began springing up and that's kind of where it led [to ending the relationship]. (John, 28, player)

As previously mentioned, John and his ex-fiancée called off their engagement only a month before the wedding. Yet John saw his negative history with WoW as a blessing in disguise as it exacerbated the couple's previously existing problems and allowed him to realize that this relationship would not work in the long run. However, with John and his previous fiancée maintaining their virtual lives in favor of their real world relationship caused additional problems to arise.

In some cases, especially when one partner did not have as much experience with WoW, the other would help by giving advice or helping their character to attain a higher level faster. In Bruce and Sparrow's case, Bruce was more experienced with WoW after playing for the past six years and started a new character in order to be on the same level and help her along in the game:

He's a death knight right now because he was a level 80...troll I think, and then he wanted to be on my level so we could play together and it was back when I was lower so he just started a new character and leveled up with me. He doesn't really play other toons that much so it's just that one. (Sparrow, 21, player)

Jimmy used his more experienced higher level character to help Amelia level faster by taking on difficult quests that would be out of her reach if she played alone:

He would take me on higher level quests...quests I couldn't do on my level...power leveling. He would help me with those quests and level faster. That's all we would do, go on quests and finish quests and level. (Amelia, 24, ex-player)

In Roxanne and Seth's case, Seth took the role of a backseat driver and helped Roxanne to learn basic functions before focusing on leveling and more difficult activities in WoW:

Even when she does play now I'll sit behind her. I don't want to be mean but sometimes I'm so used to these type of games and the controls that it's just second nature to me...the hardest for Roxanne was the movements...I know in a situation with an opposing player, right now she would be dead, it's over. But I try to help her as best as possible and I try to explain it as easy as possible. I'm trying to get her used to questing...but then when you get to a certain level you just really need to have an understanding of your class. Like when she gets into five-mans and instances she's going to have to learn what her class role is. She doesn't know what a tank is. She doesn't know what a healer is. She doesn't know what other DPS classes are. She just knows what her mage is...she still has a very basic understanding of the game. (Seth, 22, player)

By offering Roxanne help while playing, Seth hoped to foster a deeper interest in the game in order to maintain this common ground. While he acknowledged that he can come off as "mean" when teaching her, he also values this virtual world and wants to share it with his girlfriend, whom he believes requires direction. Roxanne stated that she generally appreciated his help since she has not had previous experience with MMOs and saw the game as something they shared a common interest in. In this case, Seth was investing in his girlfriend's virtual life which, according to social exchange theory, he can later "profit" or benefit from Roxanne possessing a better understanding and level of respect for his hobby.

Although many players were willing to help their partners advance and succeed in the game, the end result was not always a WoW dream team. Cody and Michelle had encountered problems because of their separate interests within the game:

We quested together like we leveled a character together and did dungeons. I tried teaching her how to PVP, that didn't work well. And I had her raid with me for a little bit, she wasn't really interested in that either. We were in a guild together, but it was a raiding guild, and I got her a friend invite...I've been a member in there for awhile, so I was like 'hey invite her and we'll do 10 man, and she'll be doing 10 mans with us'. She did a 25 man once or twice but wasn't really interested. (Cody, 21, player)

Although Michelle did enjoy playing WoW when she was an active player, she did not share much interest in the types of activities within the game that Cody enjoyed. She explained that much of her disinterest in raiding came from problems within the guild:

After a point I started not liking his guild at all...there was this one girl in the guild that would just cause so much drama. She would cause drama with a friend...and then he would have arguments with the officers and then she would backstab him and he was like, "What the hell, I thought you were my friend". And so I stopped because [Cody and I] both got sucked into the drama. They have nothing else in their lives, and so that would make me mad that he would still talk to these people, or play with them. (Michelle, 21, ex-player)

Regardless of the past "guild drama" however, WoW was still considered a positive component in their relationship, considering that it "gave [them] something to do together" (Cody, 21, player). WoW offered a pleasant, shared activity to engage in together when they stayed home for the day, and Michelle reported an interest in possibly getting back into WoW when she had more free time. This couple, however, showed that a virtual life requires maintenance and could present difficulties to those involved; without both partners being involved in WoW, "guild drama" would have not been a problem among the couple. This then presents an interesting element that the construction of the relationship carries into the game and, according to distributed cognition theory, the interaction with WoW plays an important role in how the relationship is maintained.

In sum, among couples in which both partners played WoW, most couples chose to join forces and help each other with leveling characters, completing raids and dungeons, or just simply sharing advice. However, playing together was not always positive for all couples. Negative aspects of playing WoW together included competitiveness over who was the better player and other problems with "guild drama" or related conflicts among players. These negative

aspects of the game could spill over from the virtual world into the physical world and vice versa through the interaction between partners and WoW. Nonetheless, the theme of sharing the game and using it as a common interest was generally considered to be a strength in the relationship. Many couples believed WoW gave them an activity to engage in together, to help each other, or even bridge distances in the real world.

Virtual Life and Real Life: Intersections between the Real World and In-Game Life

A number of couples discussed the connection between real life and virtual life, expressing that the experience of virtual life in World of Warcraft could affect romantic relationships more generally. The remainder of this chapter therefore explores these intersections between real and virtual worlds, particularly with regard to the social nature of the game. The first section below compares friendships in real life with those that are maintained only through WoW. The next section explores preferences for playing WoW solo or with a group of people, as information about the people that players choose to interact with in the game can show how they may influence playing habits and, in turn, affect romantic relationships. The final section examines how the knowledge that partners, specifically non-playing partners, have about WoW and the people that their significant other interacts with are negotiated within relationships in ways that may enhance relationship quality and connections between partners.

Real-life Vs. In-Game Friends

World of Warcraft is largely advertised as a social game with many activities such as dungeons or raids that require more than one player. For those who need more players for a certain task, the dungeon finder can be used to collect random players together for a specific dungeon. However, many prefer to play with people with whom they are already familiar in the

physical world or through the game. The majority of players interviewed preferred to play with real-life friends they knew outside of the game. For example, Jacob described the importance of existing friendships in navigating the game world, avoiding people within the game that he did not know:

For some reason I never played with people that I didn't really know that well. If I didn't know you I was probably very rude to you just by not saying anything. It would always be with people I knew in the real world and they would just say 'hey join our guild!' (Jacob, 26, player)

Some people even refused to become friends with random people that they met through the game, choosing to only play with people they knew personally:

Unless I can hang out with 'my' people, I tend to prefer soloing now. I think I've gotten a bit jaded after all this time, and committing to new social ties now that my gaming time is fairly sporadic isn't something I'm actively looking to do. (Robert, 23, player)

Because the majority of players preferred playing with people who were personally familiar to them, the dedication that they expressed with regard to those people was also stronger:

That peer pressure, because many of them I know in real life, about eight who regularly do it, I know that without me coming it's a lot harder for them to raid. So, I'm committed, I'll come on, and do some attempting for around 4 hours. (Richard, 26, player)

This example shows that social connections may be fostered in positive ways through the game, but also that fellow players may represent a source of pressure with regard to the timing and duration of game-playing. What is interesting about these players who chose to only play with people they were familiar with is that this goes against the stereotype that people seek friends in virtual worlds because of an inability to socialize with people in the real world; the majority of players seemed to enjoy the break from the real world that the game offered but preferred to reinforce existing relationships with real-life relationships.

In cases where a player interacted with people that were only known through the game, these relationships seemed temporary as players reported choosing to switch servers and even factions whenever the opportunity to play with their real world friends arose:

I have met people on WoW and played with them but I don't play with them anymore. I actually switched servers when Cataclysm came out because my roommate wanted to switch and another one of my real life friends wanted to play with me and she was on the Alliance side and I used to play Horde. So my roommate switched to this server and started a character on the alliance side and then my other friend transferred to that server so I started a new character. So all my friends that I used to have that were just in-game friends were on my old Horde character. (Alex, 21, player)

Richard, Cody, and John had also switched servers or factions solely to play WoW together.

Although loyalty to a certain faction within the game is common, the willingness to switch in order to play with or follow real-life friends suggests that existing, real-life friendships appeared to trump the more temporary and tenuous ties created entirely through virtual interaction with WoW. These players showed a preference for using the social opportunities created by the game to enhance and contribute to existing relationships rather than to interact and connect with players in the virtual world that they did not already know.

Some players did not mind playing with random people, but no one identified this option as a preference. In some cases, however, the player would develop an alliance between people they met through the game, especially if they had few or no real-life friends involved in the game. Amelia and Jimmy noted that they “never really played with anybody in real life, only people we've met online” (Amelia, 24, ex-player). While they played with strangers, Amelia and Jimmy felt no connection to these people and only saw them as a necessity for certain tasks within the game, such as raids or quests that required a group.

For most players who played WoW with their existing network of real-life friends, the general consensus concerning in-game friends was to keep them at a distance:

I don't get too personal, I keep it social but I'm not going to tell them I just got off work. Like I'll say "hey, I just got off work" but I'm not going to tell you where I work...I keep it very casual, they don't need to know about me. You need to know about when I'm online and I'm playing and we talk like 'did you see the game last week?' or 'do you watch basketball?' If I find anybody that likes sports then sure, I'll have that kind of level connection with them but they really don't know my everyday struggles like someone I work with or a friend that I hang out with everyday and is seeing that struggle in real life. (Seth, 22, player)

Seth preferred to keep his personal life to himself when it came to online gaming friends and strongly opposed asking WoW friends for advice, believing they would not understand where he stood in life. Even in Amelia and Jimmy's case, where they only played with random people that they met through the game, the conversations were strictly about WoW. For Zack, the difference between acquaintances and friends was clear and acquaintances within WoW never crossed the line into the friend realm:

I don't really have a lot of friends. I have a closer circle of really good friends, and then a large expanse of people that I know. So I would have never called them friends, because if I'm going to call you my friend, you're the kind of person who I'd loan money to, or let you crash on my couch. I would probably never go to meet any of the people on WoW at all. So I guess because I put a larger value on friendship, I wouldn't call any of my guildmates friends. Probably on the same level as not a friend from work, but an acquaintance from work. So, if a bunch of people from work were going to go have a drink after work, I would go. If we all lived in Gainesville, and they said let's grab a beer after the raid, I'd go and hang out with them. But I'd never invite them to my house. (Zack, 26, ex-player)

Bruce also felt that putting in-game friends on the same level as real life friends was difficult not only because of distance but because of the considerably small amount of time he actually talked to them through WoW:

I felt a lot less connected. Mainly because I just don't spend as much time with those people. In real life these are people I spend hours and hours with. People on WoW, let's say I play for two hours, it doesn't necessarily mean they're going to be on for those same two hours. There's also the possibility where you don't see them and it's kind of hard to feel connected to them too when you only know them online but for the most part, we just don't talk as much. (Bruce, 28, player)

In-game friends, in general, were never considered close friends and were relegated to the status of casual friends or acquaintances. These findings underscore the relative anonymity of within-game contacts; players remain guarded in their interactions with those whom they meet strictly on-line, and their virtual interactions were clearly delimited and separate from their real-life relationships.

One player described learning from experience that keeping some distance between WoW friends and personal life was a wise choice:

Before when I was playing with [my in-game friends] a lot, like five raids a week, I spent more time with them than with people that I knew, so they kind of became the people I would talk to about stuff. I learned pretty quickly that was a mistake, so I refrain from doing things like that now. They get involved in your personal life and when your other half is also involved in this same group of people it becomes a he-said she-said and they try to involve themselves in things they have no business involving themselves in. It gets messy. (John, 28, player)

John explained that since his fiancée at the time interacted with the same group of people, his in-game friends seemed to try to play them against each other by starting rumors or sharing information that was told to them in confidentiality. Although no other player had an experience where their in-game friends became involved in their personal lives, players appeared to intentionally avoid such situations by never giving their WoW friends the opportunity to learn about their personal lives in depth. This could be because many players feel that there is a disconnect between them and virtual friends and, thus, a lack of trust.

In general, most players preferred to play with real life friends with the occasional random person joining their ranks within the game. Some players even began new characters despite investing large amounts of time on other factions and servers in order to play with real life friends, rather than playing primarily with the random people with whom they had already begun playing. Among those who reported befriending people within the game, players noted a tendency to keep a distance between their virtual life and their real life. There were very few times where players would refer to their in-game friends as people they would truly consider friends, usually because of geographical distance, a lack of physical contact with them, and the relatively small amount of time they spent with them in the game.

Playing Solo vs. Playing in a Group

Most players reported that they preferred a particular playing style in WoW – either playing alone or with a group of people. For many players, the choice between solo or group play typically depended on whether the people they were familiar with were available and willing to play together along similar lines, which could be difficult at times:

I have a guild. I mean, a lot of things you do solo just because it's hard to get your guild to be motivated to do something with you so it's like screw it. But if I'm in a guild and they're raiding, if you want to raid you get in a guild. If you want to experience a lot of the end game, you get in a guild, and get in that position and run with them, over and over again. (Seth, 22, player)

Another factor related to playing style was whether they were questing since this was seen as a more tedious task and usually not as entertaining or action-driven as other activities such as raiding or battlegrounds. Typically, while questing, most people preferred to play solo:

It depends on what they're doing. Like I'll usually be the type of person that if someone says 'hey, anyone want to do a heroic' I'll be like 'yea count me in, I'll do it'. If they're

just running around together questing, I can do a lot of quests by myself even though it's kind of faster. It's more relaxing I guess. (Katie, 24, player)

Some players preferred playing solo regardless of the particular activity they were engaged in at the moment, stating that if they could do everything on their own, they would. For example, Zack, an ex-player, strongly preferred to play the game on his own:

If I'm not raiding, I hate playing with others. If I could solo my way to max level I would. Maybe an instance here or there, but I would rather solo myself all the way up. It always seems like when you end up with a pick up group or something like that, the XP just didn't go as fast. It seemed like an efficiency thing...I wouldn't trust other people who were just random gamers, like a 12 year old who aggro's a whole instance. (Zack, 26, ex-player)

Although Amelia often played with her fiancé and two other people she met through the game, she expressed a preference for playing on her own, stating "if I could do it by myself without him there, I would do it" (Amelia, 24, ex-player). In Roxanne's case, even though she was part of a guild, she never felt connected enough to its members and played solo the vast majority of the time:

I have a guild, I don't play with them since they're just so much more advanced than I am. Right now I'm at a point where I don't mind playing by myself. I don't see it as a way of meeting people or a way of building a relationship, it's just something to do to pass the time. (Roxanne, 19, player)

Roxanne initially did not get involved in group activities because of the lower level rating of her character, but later she was not drawn to the allure of building relationships with online strangers. She preferred and maintained a more solitary style of game play.

Some people, although they were the minority, preferred to play with a group instead of solo, believing that playing alone was less entertaining:

Well I made my own guild and it's just myself and five of my real life friends. So I do arena so you can't solo doing that. So not necessarily a large guild, because they don't raid but I don't really like soloing, it's boring. (Cody, 21, player)

Richard preferred to play alone while trying to increase the level of characters. In other instances though, he generally preferred the group content that the game offered and kept in the spirit of WoW being, first and foremost, a multiplayer game:

If there's a task to do, and I want to accomplish something, I prefer the group content. Other than that, I usually solo, like whenever I level or something. I'm not against people asking for my help, like 'hey, you're the same level, come on over here and play with me.' It is a collaborative game. (Richard, 26, player)

Interestingly, no one who was interviewed reported playing exclusively with multiple people. Even those who enjoyed the group content chose to play alone in many cases.

In general, players preferred to engage in quests or increase the level of newer characters on their own since these activities are considered to be individual tasks that are mundane in a group setting. For other available activities, like raids or arena matches, players are required to form groups in order to participate, and most players preferred to play with people they knew rather than play and possibly socialize with random, new players within the game. As mentioned earlier, many players chose to play with their real-life friends, suggesting a substantial overlap in between virtual life and real life players connections but allowing for interaction through a different medium (*i.e.* within the game as well as real-life). This could have an effect on a player's romantic relationship since there seems to be a preference among players to occupy both virtual and real worlds but have access to the same groups of people within both realms. Because of this, there could be a possible disconnect for the player concerning their virtual life and a non-playing partner. However, a non-playing partner could possibly sidestep this problem by learning some aspects of WoW.

Knowledge of World of Warcraft and World of Warcraft Friends

An important element in understanding how a player's virtual life tied in with their real life was the level of their partner's awareness of their virtual life. The majority of non-playing partners had a basic understanding of WoW, and they were aware of the various races and classes that a player could choose. This game-related knowledge demonstrated that the non-playing partners placed some importance on their partner's interests:

He likes things about it, like he really loves Worgens and warlocks and he likes when I find cool looking bosses and he enjoys being on the outside, he just doesn't appreciate grinding all the levels and thinks it's boring. (Katie, 24, player)

Some non-playing partners also expressed some interest in the general storyline of WoW, even if they did not find the game itself as interesting. For example, Steven noted that, "the story was very interesting but the execution just wasn't my style" (Steven, 22, NP/PT), describing the requirements and details of game play as a weakness in the game that did not hold his attention. Similarly, Abby also found the storyline of the game interesting, but that was where the curiosity ended:

He'll explain things to me if I ask questions. Like he'll tell me about a certain boss, but beyond that I don't know too much about it. I know that when Richard comes back later, and breaks it down into a story format, I say "that's really cool." But, it's different when he tells it and what I see on the screen... Apparently there are books out there too; I told him if he got books I would read them. As for the game though, I don't think there's enough to be engaged, you know? (Abby, 22, NP/NP)

While Abby had never tried the game for herself, Richard often told her about what he was doing in the game and had sparked an interest in her for the storyline, which has also led to Abby showing some interest in his activities. Similarly, although Steven tried the game and was not impressed, he still enjoyed discussing WoW with Katie:

What little I knew, I could discuss with her or learn more even if I'm not really into it. I found it kind of interesting so it was something I could ask questions about, and she felt knowledgeable enough to discuss it with me. (Steven, 22, NP/PT)

For Katie, a WoW player, and her partner Steven, a non-player, discussions about WoW provided a way for Katie to bring her virtual life into her real world relationship, and they gave the couple a common connection to the game even though Steven did not want to play. This connection was initially fueled by Steven's interest in the storyline and Katie's willingness to share her enthusiasm with WoW, which eventually led to a common interest.

Some non-playing partners had a basic understanding of WoW, but not everyone could or desired to keep up with the mythos and minutia of such an expansive game. Nevertheless, most non-players did have some knowledge of the people with whom their partner played in the game:

Well he doesn't really talk to me about the real life friends that we'll see on a daily basis anyways but, I mean he has friends that are in California and other states and he'll talk about them. I don't really understand how he can have that close of a friendship with them. Some of them have families and are in their 30s and 40s. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Although Megan knew the majority of Alex's friends from WoW since they were people they interacted with regularly in real-life, Alex had other friends that he knew solely through the game. However, he often shared information with her about these online friends who were geographically distant. Since most players interacted with real-life friends who then became mutual friends of the couple, non-playing partners were typically aware of the people with whom their significant other was playing.

However, non-playing partners generally reported having much less knowledge of the "pick-up groups" or groups made up of random players with whom their partners may have occasionally played:

He also does pick-up groups and everything. He's been doing a lot of stuff with pick-up groups the past couple weeks, but I don't know who they are. With the pick-up groups, it's only people he has met online. They have marketplaces where you can say I need a hunter that does this and everything. I don't think he knows them. (Abby, 22, NP/NP)

Although Abby generally knew the people with whom her partner played WoW, she noted that Richard shared less about the random pick-up groups with whom he played; she suggests that this is not a part of Richard's virtual life that he feels worth sharing. However, he does involve her by sharing information about storylines, established friends, and other details about his activities within WoW.

Tanya, another non-playing partner, knew that the majority of John's friends on WoW were military buddies and other real-life friends. She was also aware of the random people he played with, but she described these people as distinctly different, stating "I would say there are definitely some people he only knows on WoW. I don't listen to them but he doesn't really talk about them either because they're not really people" (Tanya, 22, NP/NP). Her response suggested that she perceived the random connections within the game as less real and less important to herself and her boyfriend considering that he does not share information about pick-up groups. Although this sentiment was only mentioned with Tanya, this comment illustrates how some people, especially non-players, could see online people as less important because of the lack of a connection to their real life.

As shown in this section, many non-playing partners, including those who had never tried to play WoW and deemed it unworthy of attention, showed an impressive knowledge of the game. They also knew about the people that their partner interacted with in the game, indicating that their partner shared with them these details of their virtual life. Non-players, by recapping these details also showed that even though they may not have shared an interest in the MMO, it

was still worthy of attention within the context of their relationship. Overall, the partners' knowledge about WoW and WoW friends shows that the virtual and real selves are not kept separate in most cases but are typically brought together, even if the non-playing partner did not follow the playing partner into this other world. According to social exchange theory, this investment by non-playing partners (*i.e.*, learning about WoW) could possibly strengthen a relationship because of their attempt to share in the game from a distance.

CHAPTER 5
“FIVE MORE MINUTES”: NAVIGATING THE WORLDS OF ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS AND ONLINE GAMING

The current chapter focuses on the perceived effects of World of Warcraft on couples' real lives and relationships. Three main themes emerged from the interviews. The first is a player's degree of control over playing habits and playing time. Second, the concept of players being physically present versus mentally present is explored to understand the impact of WoW on the relationship as well as the methods that couples have developed to balance their virtual and real lives. The third section explores the various problems as well as positive outcomes that couples have associated with playing to illuminate how relationships can be affected, both positively and negatively by WoW.

Controlling World of Warcraft

Many players described having developed a method to control how much time they devoted to World of Warcraft. Since all of the playing partners were in college, employed, or both in addition to being in a relationship, the amount of play time required careful moderation. In most cases, the way to balance the time demands was simply to cut back on the time spent playing:

I usually only play on the weekends because of school but even then...it's something I go back and forth over. Like, I should be studying, you are in school, that should be your focus. (Roxanne, 19, player)

Sparrow also realized that she had to cut back on playing WoW when the time demands of school would pick up, stating “I stopped because I had organic chemistry and biochemistry so I don't play for giant chunks of months” (Sparrow, 21, player).

While the demands of schoolwork were cited as one reason that players cut back on WoW, being in a relationship also often led to players reducing their playing time. For example, Cody noted that a new relationship prompted him to cut back on the more time-intensive activities in WoW in order to set aside more time for Michelle:

When I first started dating her I did raid a lot and PVPed a lot, like to an extravagant amount. Because I'd be full time raiding like three times a week, and PVPing. That's a lot of time. So, I couldn't do that anymore. So I mean I just play less. That's about it, I don't necessarily have any particular strategy other than to not go on WoW just to sit there, you know what I mean, that's just stupid. (Cody, 21, player)

Similarly, Megan had noticed that Alex also cut down on playing, especially with regard to time spent raiding:

He raids probably about once a week now. It used to be a lot more but his schedule just like mine is kind of up in the air on a week to week basis. He used to be able to do it at a certain time on a weekly basis but now since it changes so much he kind of has to work with what days he knows he's available. I think that's cut down on it. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Alex in turn explained that he changed his playing habits when Megan first began spending time at his house so that he could devote more attention to his girlfriend:

When she first started hanging out all the time at my place, I rarely played at all but then I gradually started playing. I used to play a lot more too when we first started dating. I used to raid several times a week. She would go out on Thursday nights and I would raid on Thursday night, like set it up that way. (Alex, 21, player)

Although Alex had drastically cut back on raiding after switching servers, he acknowledged that his relationship with Megan also accounted for his lack of motivation to get back into raiding as often.

Other couples also described a reduction in time spent playing WoW related to their relationships. For Bruce and Sparrow, WoW was pushed aside whenever they visited each other because of the infrequency of visits and the importance of spending time together when given the chance:

We don't play when he visits because when he comes here he stays here and we only have one computer so we can't really play together and we prefer to spend time together at home, watch movies a lot, go out the dinner, go out to the movies. (Sparrow, 21, player)

When Jacob was away at college, he averaged over forty hours on the game, but during Amy's visits and especially when they eventually moved into an apartment together, he quickly adjusted his gaming habits in order to make sure he had plenty of time for her and the relationship:

After we moved in with each other a few years ago...I eventually spent less and less amounts of time playing because we've got more time together, we've got more things to do and be with each other and there's only one computer in the house and we give each other the death glares if we're on it too long. (Jacob, 26, player)

Typically, Jacob now kept his playing sessions down to about two hours in order to make time for Amy and to give her the opportunity to share the only computer in their apartment. However, when Amy left town, Jacob reverted back to his old playing habits of playing six to eight hours per day to help pass the time until she returned. In these instances where players cut back on WoW, it was evident that real-life was prioritized over virtual life, especially when it came to school or long-distance relationships.

Yet another common strategy for controlling playing habits was to play WoW while their partner was either asleep or out of the house. As previously mentioned, Jacob would play much more when Amy was not around, and Richard practiced the same method of playing more when Abby was out of the house due to her hectic schedule of attending graduate classes and teaching:

We got into a routine one semester when I would come over after class, and [the night he would come over] he usually wouldn't play. If he knew I was coming, he usually wouldn't play the game...I think part of it is how our schedules work out. We do have our time together, and he has his time to do his hobbies, and I do mine. Like, he'll go on WoW and I'll go to the gym...Now that we are back to our regular routine, however, it's not really affecting our relationship either way. He mostly plays after I've gone to bed. (Abby, 22, NP/NP)

With Roxanne, when asked how much Seth played per week, she had no idea how much or how often he was on the game because of his strategy of playing when she left for work or school and wrapping up his session when she would return:

Oh I have no idea, he usually plays when I'm not home so I'll sometimes come home and he's still playing and he's like 'I'll be done in like 20 minutes', and I'm like ok. So I don't really know. He could play basically all day until I get home from work or from school. (Roxanne, 19, player)

Without their partners knowing exactly how much they were playing, many problems that could arise due to excessive playing were avoided, and couples had more time to spend together without the game interrupting.

However, even when game play did not interfere with the couple's time together, partners noted that they would step in and voice their concerns when they believed their significant other was playing too much:

She thinks I spend too much time on it, and she's probably right. I admit that. I try to find ways to not spend as much time on it sometimes. Like, I'll realize it and try to avoid it. Our relationship has had a positive effect on my time management skills with WoW. I think there have been times when, especially when she's not busy, when she feels like I'm spending even more time on the game. That's something I'm trying to work on though. (Richard, 26, player)

Because Abby had explicitly commented on the time Richard spent on WoW, he was able to recognize that he may have been playing more than he should have been, prompting him to focus

on managing his playing time. Alex also described that his partner, Megan, had spoken up about his playing habits and her wishes for him to cut back:

She's never like 'ok you need to stop playing WoW or I'll break up with you' or anything like that. She's voiced opinions occasionally like she wants me to stop playing in certain instances or tells me to not play as much but she never tells me to completely stop playing. (Alex, 21, player)

Typically, the partners who did not play WoW were more likely to speak up about their partner playing too much. Generally, however, most players felt that they were able to control their playing habits without their partners saying anything.

Overall, many partners controlled their playing habits by cutting back on the time they normally played WoW, especially when they had more school work or when their partner was around more often. Players defined playing WoW as excessive when it began to interfere with school, work, or their relationships with their partner, friends, or family and not necessarily the amount of time played. However, by playing less, players were able to devote more time to other areas of their real life that had previously received less attention. In addition to cutting back, many players would wait until their significant other was out of the house or asleep before playing in order to spend time with their partner or give the impression that they did not play as often to avoid potential problems. Using this method would result in players playing WoW less based on how often their partner was present. However, in some cases, this method may not have been a way to control playing habits but was rather a denial to their partner of how much they played. Even when the play occurred at times that did not interfere with the relationship, it could still be at an intensity that was disruptive to real-life matters. In other instances players cut back on how much time they played WoW in response to the partner expressing concern with their

playing habits. However, this was not a common method of controlling WoW and typically only non-playing partners tried to actively reduce the amount of time their partner played.

Physically Vs. Mentally Present

Many non-playing partners described the perception of their significant other being around physically but not being mentally available. The concept of having a virtual life in addition to a real life is a relatively new notion that some partners had never encountered and they needed time to adjust. In most cases, partners interpreted the circumstances as their partner not paying attention to them. For example, Abby noted:

When [the county] had its spring break, I started to get in Richard's hair and say 'why don't you pay attention to me? I'm here and I'm bored!' I was home, I had no homework because both of my classes were canceled that week. I had no lesson plans to write, I had no clubs or anything to go to that week. So, I was just home with nothing to do. That's what made it different. (Abby, 22, NP/NP)

Abby felt that Richard was not paying attention to her even though they were in the same room.

Megan was able to capture what may have been going on in such cases of having a partner who was physically but not mentally present:

For me I thought unwinding and doing your own thing usually involved being separated and he doesn't really go shopping with me and I do my own things with my girlfriends so I figured his release would be doing stuff with his guy friends and going out but instead it's playing WoW with his guy friends, which usually involves me being there so I have a hard time understanding. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Many non-playing partners found it difficult to understand how their partner could unwind while in the same room whereas other people might typically leave their home to relax and take some time away from a hectic life. However, when it came to playing WoW, the player was still

physically in the room but mentally they were unavailable. Tanya had first-hand experience with a metaphorically absent partner:

I think it's annoying when he plays because our desks are back to back to each other and I'll be doing school work and if he's not playing WoW there's usually some conversation or chatter or 'hey look at this or what about this?' But if it's WoW it's just focus on WoW and there's nothing going on and he's more reluctant to leave the house and do things like that. (Tanya, 22, NP/NP)

In this case it is easy to see how a player's behavior could change. Tanya's partner John had no problem holding a conversation while simply browsing the internet, and he could easily switch from basic internet activities to his real life surroundings and events. However, when it came to playing WoW, John was almost in a completely different world and had a difficult time maintaining conversations with Tanya and switching from the game to real life.

Following in the same vein of players being mentally absent, playing partners also reported having to balance their time between the game and their relationship. Seth tried to make it clear to Roxanne that he can divide his attention between her and playing World of Warcraft:

So when she's around, I hang out with her but now she's not working as much so she's around the house a little bit more so she's going to see me playing WoW and I'm like 'look, I'm not hanging out with my friends tonight. I'm going to play for a couple hours. By all means come upstairs, study with me. I'll turn around and I'll talk to you because I can play this game one-handed but I want to play this game a little bit and advance more into it than what I am. (Seth, 22, player)

Seth came to the understanding that the game is a pastime and although he was interested in progressing and becoming an exceptional player, he also knew that his relationship with Roxanne was something that cannot be pushed to the side. This realization made him strive to pay attention to both the game and his girlfriend simultaneously. Alex had cut back from raiding

about three times a week, in part because of switching servers but also because of his relationship with Megan:

I think it would definitely be hard to seriously raid and have a relationship. That would probably be difficult. I don't raid now so it's working out but I think if I did seriously raid it would probably affect our relationship. That takes a lot of time. I've realized that I wouldn't be able to seriously raid with her because you have to set aside so many hours on each night and they all expect you to be on. It's like you can't really commit to that. With school it's hard but with school and with a girlfriend it's impossible. I guess that is part of the reason why I haven't gotten back into raiding. (Alex, 21, player)

In this case, Alex stuck to activities that did not require as much of an investment of time and attention like raiding and dungeons. He also acknowledged that being in a relationship and in school at the same time was not something he would be able to do while also heavily playing WoW.

For Megan, however, Alex's inability to divide his attention between the game and her had often led her to purposely distract him. Because of the impact she believed the game had on their intimate lives, she reported using drastic measures in order to try to win over his attention:

I guess I kind of went in knowing that he was so into it so I've like tried to form kind of my own social experiments seeing how willing he would be to quit what he's doing at the moment to do stuff with me. So I've basically gotten naked, given him a lap dance and he still will tell me 'ok, five more minutes and then I'll be done with this thing'. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Although Megan saw this instance as somewhat comical after the fact, many partners are familiar with the "five more minutes" plea when trying to get more attention from their girlfriend or boyfriend while they are playing the game.

Katie also acknowledged the need for change in game play in order to split her attention between WoW and her relationship:

I kind of have to pay attention to how much I play WoW when I'm around him or when I'm online on instant messenger because I tend to not pay attention to him when I'm playing WoW. So I have to pay attention to what he wants to do and if he wants to do something that would require my full attention, I'll generally get off WoW or do something not as attention-grabbing like mining for gold or something. (Katie, 24, player)

Since Katie and Steven did not live together and usually only saw each other on the weekends due to their job schedules, Katie was made more aware of the limited amount of time they have. She conveyed the realization that in order to divide her time between the game and Steven she had to opt for more routine tasks in WoW that require significantly less of her attention when Steven was visiting her.

A common feeling among non-players and players alike had been the wish for a pause button. Since WoW is a real time game with people around the world simultaneously playing and interacting with each other, it cannot be paused like console games, especially in activities like raids or dungeons. The lack of a pause button can lead players to put off real-life matters since the game requires their full attention. This can also draw the player further into this virtual world because they do not have an opportunity to disengage from the virtual realm and reenter the real world:

I dated people that have played Xbox games but I actually prefer those to WoW. Then at least you can play them more together I think than WoW. They eventually end. My exes never got into online gaming, we never had a problem... WoW just doesn't have a pause button, that's the problem. With Xbox if I have a question or if I needed to talk to them they'd be able to just stop the game wherever. Now it's 'ok just give me five minutes and I'll be done with this'. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Like Megan, Robert also wished that WoW could somehow be paused. The lack of an option to pause the game has led him to cut back on his playing time and move on to other video games that can support his desire for less attention-intensive gaming:

So I've basically been moving over to games where I can just hit escape and leave the computer without bailing on someone in-game. It's not so much an issue of time as it is an issue of not being committed to anything or anyone. We don't make appointments with 20-40 other people to log in at the same time and complete various objectives when playing a single-player game or even a multiplayer game like Battlefield where one round is like half an hour and no one really cares if you leave when it's over or even in the middle of the whole thing. I wouldn't sign up for a raid or whatever that I wouldn't be able to make. Of course, any reasonable guild, including ours, has a policy that real life emergencies takes precedence over anything in-game, but it would be bad form to sign up and then constantly either canceling, or requiring impromptu AFKs all the time. With a single-player game I can just hit pause, leave, and when I get back an hour later nothing's happened and no one is affected. (Robert, 23, player)

The inability to get up and go while playing WoW had led Robert and other players to increasingly put the game on the back burner in order to focus more on their real world. Although others had not resorted to playing WoW as sparingly as Robert, many shared the sentiment that sometimes it was difficult to engage in both real life and virtual life simultaneously, leading to a mental absence at times.

It is clear that many non-playing partners had a difficulty understanding how their significant other could occupy the same room yet not be available to them. In many cases they could feel like they are being ignored and, as pointed out by Megan, it took some time to understand that even though the person is physically there they may not always be present in a more mindful fashion. Some partners eventually learned how to understand this difference but it took time especially for those who have never had experience with a person living in essentially two different worlds. Some players eventually learned how to divide their attention between the game and real life but usually this led to either changing the activities they engaged in during game play or shutting the game off entirely. Because WoW could cause a cleavage between the real and the virtual, *i.e.* difficulties between maintaining a WoW character and real life relationships, players and non-players both suggested that the ability to pause the game would make life easier. Being able to interrupt or stop the game play while it was in progress would

allow players to switch between worlds and be more mentally present for their partners, and other real life matters would require less deliberate effort and negotiation to accommodate the demands of the game.

World of Warcraft and Its Outcomes

Up until this point, this study has mostly focused on perceptions of World of Warcraft, how the game fit into couples' lives, and how these couples managed the presence of a virtual life in addition to their real one. However, both positive and negative outcomes were also important and were a testament to the role that WoW played in relationships. Although players and non-players placed some of the responsibility on WoW for these outcomes, almost everyone still felt that the player's own actions concerning the game were central to how their lives and relationships were affected. As mentioned previously, both John and Zack had problems in the past due to excessive playing. Zack, who was married for three years, buried himself in the game in response to his frustration with his previous partner; his escapes into the game allowed existing problems in the relationship to progressively get worse. When he began dating Monica, she became aware of how he changed while playing the game:

Once we started a formal relationship, I continued to play WoW. But she started mentioning to me that when I wasn't playing WoW I had a different attention span than when I was. She said when we went out of town for a week, she said I was almost a completely different person without access to a computer than I was with a computer and WoW. She had a psych degree as well, and she ended up helping me identify that I had used WoW as an escape from the problems of my personal life for so long, that it was a trained behavior, that when I was playing WoW, there was nothing else in the world around me. That I was just zoned out. So she would say something to me, and I wouldn't even hear her, or she would ask me to do something, and it wouldn't get done because I was playing WoW. (Zack, 26, ex-player)

Zack eventually quit WoW though he played many other MMOs. He now realized the negative impact of becoming too fixated on these types of games with regard to relationships and other aspects of his life. By using WoW as an escape, he stayed in a problematic relationship and ignored problems rather than facing them or leaving the relationship earlier. His current partner, Monica, appeared committed to ensuring that Zack did not repeat this pattern in their relationship and helped him realize that addressing concerns in the real world instead of using WoW as an escape would benefit both of them.

John reported experiencing a variety of negative consequences, some of which were related to or exacerbated by playing WoW. He reported constantly feeling like his ex-fiancée was trying to turn WoW into a contest between them. Furthermore, he noted that he became so enraptured with the game as an escape that it eventually led to infidelity:

I had a friend on there that was...she was in a really bad relationship and so was I so we reached out to each other and started talking. Talking led to phone calls, phone calls led to an actual visit, things like that. It kind of got out of hand but we both shared the same misery so there was that but once that [misery] ended so did that. It led to extramarital affairs on both sides. (John, 28, player)

While many players saw playing WoW as a form of escape, John and Zack took this to an extreme, using WoW to escape from serious problems that needed to be faced and addressed rather than ignored. Many players saw WoW as a way to relax and escape from the stress of work or school, but those who reported trying to escape from unhappy relationships experienced particularly negative outcomes.

For Cody and Michelle, the guild drama experienced in the game had caused Michelle to be wearier of the people with whom Cody played. According to Cody, Michelle had responded

by imposing conditions regarding the people with whom he was to play, or more importantly, those with whom he should not play:

When I was still raiding there'd be stupid guild drama... there were like one or two attention seeking girls in our guild and they would cause drama, and Michelle hates guild drama. So she wouldn't like when I was in the guild and it was affecting me. There was one point where when I wanted to restart playing and they had just introduced the guild perk stuff and I was like 'oh I can just rejoin my old guild she didn't really want that to happen...but at this point I was just trying to get us leveling faster and she's like 'hell no, you shouldn't have to deal with that'. (Cody, 21, player)

Because of the past issue with Cody and Michelle's old guild, Michelle was distrustful of the people with whom Cody played and even demanded that his next guild be one that he formed in order to have more control over who joined. With this distrust among the couple and WoW, other problems concerning the game could possibly arise, which would weaken the relationship.

Megan noticed that when Alex was raiding more he would break off social arrangements with both her and real-life friends in order to raid with people he had met online. To her, this represented a very real paradox: how could Alex delay activities with her, or even procrastinate on his schoolwork, all in favor of those he had met online?:

Sometimes when he can get out of arrangements he's made to go on raiding I sometimes wonder how they're his friends. They're so attached to having to do this raid so they can level that they can't understand that maybe we can go out to dinner or do other stuff. (Megan, 20, NP/NP)

Like Alex, many players played WoW when they had school work due, and some took days off from work to play new content. While most players interviewed were able to control their playing overall, many would use WoW to procrastinate and avoid pressing matters in the real world.

Although a player's habits could lead to some harmful outcomes, some saw the good in WoW and claimed that the game had helped both the couple as a whole and individuals within the relationship. Robert, who had played all of his adult life, saw the game and the internet as tools that helped him become more aware of the world and the people around him:

I started playing when I was 16, 17ish, so I've basically gone through the whole critical mental maturation process et cetera with WoW being a major factor...well, along with the rest of the internet I guess. If anything, it's effective in that it teaches you at a very young age that there will always be someone who knows more about any given subject than you do, and that an opinion, no matter how outlandish it seems to you, will always be held in earnest by someone. (Robert, 23, player)

By engaging with people in the game who were different from himself and were better at the game than him, Robert came to develop a more worldly view that he may not have developed as easily without the presence of the internet and an inherently social game.

Some described the game as actually having taught players to have control over their lives by first gaining control over their playing habits:

I learned control more than anything. That's something I can say WoW is wholly responsible for. I learned how to say no because for a while, I don't know if you've ever tried this but if you ever want an interesting experience stop playing for two weeks. Don't log in. After a week you'll feel the urge to log in like 'oh no I wonder what I'm missing'. At the second week you no longer care. (John, 28, player)

Due to John's troubled past with WoW and his previous relationship he eventually had to learn how to control the amount of time he played as he continued to play WoW sporadically. Others expressed similar sentiments about learning how to manage their time with WoW, through previous mistakes or realizing before problems arose, and this not only pertained to the time spent playing but also to events in the real world. Especially since most of the players interviewed were actively enrolled in school at the time of the interview, many described the

realization that they could only afford to play for two hours instead of four on a certain night because of schoolwork as a common lesson that players learned from playing the game.

Many players were able to see some positive outcomes in their lives related to WoW, but non-playing partners also noted that they gained from their partner's playing habits. For Amy, WoW helped her come to terms with her fiancé's obsessive personality:

I think it was the first in a series of me learning to deal with his obsessions because he tends to get very into things and will sometimes forget about other things in his life until he moves on to the next obsession. (Amy, 24, NP/PT)

While WoW probably did not transform her boyfriend Jacob into a person with an addictive personality, the game helped highlight one of his character traits. Amy realized she would have to learn to handle his obsessive behavior if she was going to stay with Jacob; she attributed this learning to the success of their relationship and they planned to marry at the end of the year.

Other non-playing partners alluded to how WoW helped them understand their significant other's personality and how to manage their free time when players were focused on the game instead of them:

I didn't really think it was that big of a deal when he played, I just saw it as my motivation to get more school work done on time and go out volunteer and maybe do some other things with friends. (Tanya, 22, NP/NP)

Many partners like Tanya saw the time when their partner was playing as an opportunity to engage in activities that they enjoyed on their own or focus on school work more than if they did have their partner's attention. In cases like this, partners learned that they did not have to spend all of their time with their partners and should use this extra time to pursue their own interests and shape their individual identity.

Overall, couples experienced both negative and positive outcomes due to the playing habits of players. Some players became too fixated on the game to a point where problems which should have been addressed were left unchecked and could lead to even bigger issues. Using WoW as an escape was common, but it was particularly problematic when players used WoW to avoid dealing with concerns in their relationship. Problems could also arise because of the people that players had chosen to interact with. Instances where other players were taking advantage of or flirting with a romantically unavailable player could lead to distrust among partners and eventually a dislike for the game. In addition, many players fell into using WoW to procrastinate on their job and schoolwork unless they learned how to balance their playing habits.

However, some couples were able to see the good in WoW. Some players, especially those that had played since their teen years, saw the game as a way to discover the social world in an expansive way and understand how they fit into the bigger picture. Other players saw the game as a way to learn control and balance, not only when pertaining to video games, but in the larger world overall. For non-players, the game served as a microcosm of their partner's personality and helped them become more aware of what type of person they were in order to adapt accordingly. Finally, non-playing partners saw the time that their significant other spent playing WoW as an opportunity to accomplish their own goals, whether that was getting ahead on schoolwork, taking up a hobby they were interested in, or getting involved with their school and community.

CHAPTER 6 BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored how the meanings and perceptions of World of Warcraft are constructed and negotiated within the context of romantic relationships among college-aged people, and how these couples construct their relationships in the presence of a virtual life. This chapter examines how the project observations fit together to create a vivid picture of the young couples and their interactions with the virtual life within WoW. The first section summarizes the key themes that arose from the interviews to provide a clear understanding of how WoW has influenced relationships. The remainder of this chapter discusses the implications of this study for relationships and the general population as a whole and outlines important limitations of this study and questions for further research.

Summary and Conclusions

This study utilized a trio of theoretical frameworks in order to comprehend how couples understand and shape their relationship in the presence of a virtual element. These frameworks included symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and distributed cognition, which when combined, help explain how couples come to understand the world around them, the game's place in their lives, and their relationship. The way that these frameworks came into play can be seen in how individuals in each couple came to view WoW and what this understanding contributed to the relationship. Through individuals interacting with each other and World of Warcraft in a complex fashion, these couples' experiences illuminated how virtual and real life intersected and how they navigated the unique challenges and contributions that WoW represented in their relationships and real world lives.

World of Warcraft as a Symbol

For many couples, the common stigmas of WoW, including the notions of addiction and escapism were central to their assessments of the game and how they navigated it within the context of their relationships. Both individual and shared perceptions and opinions of the game represented important reference points for interpreting game play, describing motivations, and negotiating the place of WoW within their lives and relationships. In particular, learning how couples processed the addiction discourse within the context of their own experiences with WoW provided a key insight into how the game fit into a couple's life and what it meant to them. Most individuals reported coming in contact with obsessive playing habits and, because of the experience, came to the conclusion that WoW was a pastime that should be used in moderation. This call for self-control was even stronger when a player was in a romantic relationship in addition to being employed or enrolled in school. Keeping distributed cognition theory and symbolic interactionism in mind, these previous interactions with WoW contributed to the meanings of the game for the couples interviewed. More specifically, the game already had implications for many people involved in this study, especially players, and this factored into the way that WoW interacted with the couple, thus changing the way that the relationship was constructed around the game and what the relationship meant to the couple.

For those who currently played or had played in the past, there was generally a positive to neutral outlook of the game regardless of their experience with game addiction. This was because of their own familiarity with WoW, which provided the opportunity to understand that the game was something they had control over, for example, with regard to the amount of time spent playing. Some players reported having problems in the past related to excessive playing, but even these people tended to see these problems as a fault of their own rather than as a

problem inherent to the game. In other words, most individuals, whether they played WoW or not, saw the game as something a player had complete agency over rather than believing that the structure of the game was partially responsible for excessive playing. WoW came to symbolize a hobby that could provide a much needed distraction from the stress and frustration of everyday life, an entertaining activity that could lift the spirits and produce a sense of accomplishment, and a social venue where people regardless of distance could meet and work together towards common, albeit whimsical goals.

World of Warcraft also represented an entity that was regarded as inculpable with regard to any perceived negative consequences of game-playing. Because of the lack of explicit coercion between players and the game, players were more apt to blame obsessive playing habits on personal shortcomings, rather than on aspects of WoW's structure that are designed to draw in and maintain a player's attention. Players regarded the game as an inanimate object, whereas players were considered to be rational beings who exercised agency and were capable of making the choice whether to play or not. This perception resonated with Peters and Malesky's (2008) research, which examined the links between addictive gaming and an individual's predisposition. While individuals acknowledged the addictive potential of WoW, the game was generally likened to other natural activities like eating or intercourse. By doing this, WoW was regarded by players as a value-neutral entity even in the worst circumstances, e.g. obsessive playing, for which the blame could only be placed on an individual's lack of control.

For non-playing partners, WoW was mostly considered an activity that was neither inherently good nor bad. However, partners without any personal experience playing the game expressed opinions that tended to be more negative, seeing the game as a waste of time and designed to purposefully enrapture its players. Whereas players tended to blame the player for

obsessive playing habits, non-players who were more removed from the game believed that WoW itself shared some responsibility for being an addictive pastime; just as players had arrived at their conclusions based on personal experience so too did non-playing partners. These partners saw the game from an outsider point of view and could recognize the changes that a player's personality would undergo as a result of being involved in the game. Again, the results showed that these individuals created their own meaning for WoW based on their interactions with their playing partner, and these interpretations became their social reality with regard to the game and relationship. Although many of the non-playing partners (regardless of whether they tried the game) considered WoW to be "silly", they were also aware that investing too much time into it could lead to conflict in the relationship and their lives overall. Based on a study by Knox, Zusman, White, and Haskins (2009), this conflict could result from the perceived loss of interaction from their playing partner. While non-playing partners typically reported feeling indifferent to their significant others playing WoW, they stayed alert to the potential for excessive playing and spoke up when the game became potentially problematic. In essence, WoW came to symbolize an activity that could be entertaining to some individuals but required introspection and vigilance on the player's part, or sometimes a partner's observations or intervention, in order to avoid the negative consequences of becoming overly engrossed with the game.

Connections between Partners and Virtual Life

In instances where both partners played WoW, it was easier to reach a shared understanding of the game because both partners occupied the virtual world of WoW. Through the interactions among the couples and World of Warcraft, partners were able to develop shared experiences and form a unique context in which to shape their relationship; in other words, these

shared experiences essentially contributed to the couple's social construction of shared meanings and realities within the game and their relationship more generally. This means that while non-playing partners would understand their significant other's hardships and fortunes in the real world, playing partners could move between the virtual and tangible worlds effortlessly. Playing partners could maintain a mutual appreciation for each other's lives in both realms. Interestingly, players also favored interacting with friends from the real world who were able to share in both contexts of their lives, showing the importance of linking the virtual with the actual. Rather than replacing or undermining their real world relationships with virtual ones, players used the social platform offered by WoW to enrich and reinforce their existing real world relationships, including their romantic involvements. In most relationships, partners would play together when given the opportunity, but even in instances where WoW was not a shared activity couples were still able to connect with each other through their shared familiarity with the game.

Non-players were able to stand at a distance and evaluate their partner's virtual self from a real world point of view. However, this distance often made it difficult to empathize with the pleasure derived from defeating an in-game boss or the disappointment felt when losing a duel against another player. Non-playing partners tended to minimize or misunderstand these accomplishments, perceiving them as offering nothing concrete (*i.e.*, in the real world). For non-players, even the people that their partner interacted with while playing WoW were not perceived as real social ties unless these other players were people they had met in real life. This is not to say that individuals who did not play were doing a disservice to their relationship by avoiding the game, but there was an obvious tension among couples when one person entered into an alternative realm that the other did not fully understand or appreciate. This notion is

supported by Simpson (1987) who emphasized the importance of couples sharing goals, which is believed to be a good indicator of a mentally intimate relationship.

Some non-playing partners had a better grasp on this alternate world because of an interest in other fantasy-based hobbies. As a result, they seemed to more readily handle the complexity of dating a WoW player (*i.e.*, occupying both a real and alternative realm). While video games differed from WoW with regard to capabilities, and LARP existed in a different medium, the people who participated in these activities were also accustomed to occupying an alternative world through role-play. Because of the differences between these other pastimes and WoW, the alternate worlds in LARP and video games were not regarded as encompassing, but they allowed individuals, specifically those who did not play WoW, the chance to relate to their partners. These analogous activities offered an understanding of the pleasures of playing and the fulfillment that could be gained by accomplishing a goal in an intangible world. However, LARPer who did not play WoW tended to perceive WoW as utilizing an impersonal medium (*i.e.*, playing over the internet) with less emotional investment, whereas WoW players generally did not express this belief. Other partners that played console games perceived the real-time element in WoW (*i.e.*, not being able to “pause” a game or specific tasks once they were underway) as a burden that required a greater personal investment and potential disruption of other activities compared to traditional video games. Because of these differences, non-players still had some difficulty when it came to drawing parallels between their experiences with fantasy-driven activities and WoW. This disjuncture created challenges in the relationship since non-playing partners felt ignored at times because of the attention that the game demanded and players felt the need to cut back or play when their partner was not home to alleviate the problem.

When only one member of a couple played WoW, the schism between real and virtual life was often bridged by having players share details about the game, their experiences, and the people they interacted with; such sharing seemed to help alleviate the tension brought on by occupying two different worlds, which was hard to comprehend for those unfamiliar with the game. Non-players also typically made a concerted effort to bridge this gap by being mindful of their partner's activities and showing an interest in some elements of the game in a hands-off approach. This was displayed in the interviews by non-players' competence in relaying in-depth information of what the game offered, with whom their partner played and what they communicated about, and a general sense of their partner's motivation for playing. Because non-playing partners could not socially construct identical realities through WoW as a shared activity, their perceived alternative was to gain knowledge of the game and its various elements. Nonetheless, non-players' perceptions of the game did not include recognizing the sense of triumph that could be derived from WoW, a major theme and motivation described by players. Presumably, understanding that WoW could elicit feelings of accomplishment illustrates the distinction between an individual who preferred the duality of existing in two worlds and another who found more fulfillment in living solely in the real world. In other words, couples in which both members played WoW seemed to accept and share the ability to occupy two different realms (*i.e.*, the real and virtual) and recognize that accomplishments within the game were valid and worthy of celebration since they considered themselves citizens of this virtual world. For a non-player who had no vested interest in WoW, these accomplishments had no bearing in the real world (their only realm of existing), which made these feats arbitrary or less meaningful or valuable in their eyes.

Effects of World of Warcraft

Due to the prevalent addiction discourses with regard to MMOs, players often reported spending less time within their virtual world in an effort to keep their playing habits under control. This was mostly accomplished by reducing the length of their playing sessions, though some players resorted to taking hiatuses from the game at various times in their WoW-playing history. Some players eventually returned to the game whereas others had quit indefinitely. The reason for this decrease in playing was usually because of their responsibilities to both school and their relationship even if both partners engaged in the game. The altered playing habits in response to being in a relationship were reminiscent of “transformation of motivation”, whereby a partner may sacrifice an activity they enjoy if it is not conducive to the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Although players enjoyed nurturing a virtual life, they also gave the physical world (and its commitments, responsibilities, etc.) precedence. This prioritization allowed most playing partners to minimize the game’s impact on the relationship.

However, the game still altered the dynamics of the relationship; according to distributed cognition, the presence of WoW changed the way that partners constructed and understood their relationship, making their experience somewhat unique. The concept of being physically present but not mentally available often resulted in misunderstandings between partners, especially if one partner did not play WoW. Even with partners occupying the same physical space, players became myopic while engaged in their virtual realm and unknowingly ignored their corporeal surroundings, including their significant other. Partners who also played WoW were the best equipped to negotiate mental absence with their playing partner. Those who engaged in similar activities, like playing video games or role-playing, also showed an advantage (compared to those who did not play other games) in negotiating the challenges of an unavailable partner

when trying to understand and navigate this unique facet of their relationship. This navigation typically led partners to pursue activities that they could either mentally or physically immerse themselves in, whether that was playing WoW as a shared activity or engaging in unrelated pastimes as an alternate outlet while their WoW-playing partner was preoccupied. This method of managing mental absence allowed non-playing partners to develop or nurture their own interests. Finding alternative activities could offer positive opportunities both for the individual and the relationship, but it also had the potential to cause or manifest as a symptom of serious relationship problems due to a lack of communication.

Most conflicts that arose from playing WoW generally derived from players using the game as a figurative crutch to help them cope with (or avoid) other problems or from difficulties among non-players in communicating with their partner. These findings concurred with Lo, Wang, and Fang's (2005) study, which found that increased playing decreased the quality of interpersonal relationships. In large part, players who experienced hardships due to their playing habits appeared to be attempting to substitute their real world with a virtual one. Problematic playing was used as a way to procrastinate on school work, avoid conflict with partners, and escape from everyday life. Although some players who had never encountered problems due to WoW played for similar reasons, behaviors became problematic when matters such as schoolwork or the relationship were pushed aside in an effort to replace them with a virtual realm. With non-players, keeping quiet about personal concerns regarding the game or other problems in the relationship also led to or exacerbated problems. Allowing obsessive playing to continue unchecked had the potential to worsen existing problems and to create resentment in non-playing partners towards WoW and their significant other. Partners who did speak up about playing habits were generally met with an attentive reaction, on the other hand, and this

communication helped to prevent these apprehensions from escalating into full blown animosity between the partners.

Though WoW has the potential for real and important negative implications for relationships and other facets of life, the game was utilized in positive ways. Players who had been involved in the game since their teenage years reported that WoW brought them into contact with people from various walks of life; distributed cognition theory suggests that WoW and interactions with people through the game may have expanded players' meanings of the world around them and led to a different way of thinking about the world compared to individuals who had not taken part in a virtual life. Through these interactions, many players believed that their worldview was broadened, and they were simultaneously humbled by the realization that no matter how knowledgeable or accomplished they believed themselves to be there was always room for improvement.

In addition to this exposure to a larger world, many players also learned self control. Despite some of the negative outcomes discussed by some couples, most had not experienced difficulties with the game. Players moderated the time they spent on WoW and had learned how to manage their time between worlds. For some, failed relationships and earlier problems with WoW helped them to realize and learn from their mistakes in ways that led to greater maturity and more positive later relationships. In addition to controlling their playing habits, players also noted that the background that they had gained within the game helped them to maintain equilibrium in other sectors of their lives. For players that reported past difficulties with WoW, the lesson was taken more to heart since they had already endured the repercussions of obsessive playing and were familiar with the consequences involved.

Non-players also gained some benefits from WoW. They commented that when their partners were preoccupied with the game, they were provided with the opportunity to pursue personal interests and hobbies or advance in their schoolwork or other tasks. Adjusting to one partner's WoW playing became the impetus for each member of the couple to pursue different interests and activities, thus allowing the couple to learn to maintain their individual identities and interests while also constructing an intimate relationship with a partner. In addition, partners were also able to observe a snapshot of their partner's personality through their experiences with playing WoW. By witnessing how a player moderated their playing and their investment in the game, non-playing partners could gain a clearer picture of the type of person that they were with and adapt their way of managing the relationship based on these observations.

Discussion

Literature addressing the effects of World of Warcraft and romantic relationships is practically nonexistent. This is typically due to the tendency for studies to lump online activities into a generic, "internet" category instead of addressing specific activities and platforms like WoW and similar games. In this study, WoW was exclusively examined separately from other internet pastimes, beginning from the view that the internet is not homogenous and neither are its users. When studies focus on the internet in general instead of specific activities, the differences between the types of people who use the internet for information and those who use it for entertainment or socializing are lost. By focusing only on WoW, the concept of living in a virtual realm emerged and presented a unique element that has not been addressed in prior research.

Throughout this study the complex interactions between couples and WoW have been highlighted and have shown how the popular MMO can alter the dynamic of relationships. Those

who played WoW recognized the need to balance real and virtual life and made efforts to include their significant other in both lives. Their partners would generally accept the invitation by entering into this alternate realm, or they would attempt to understand from a distance.

Regardless of how couples included the game in their relationship, the necessity to understand how World of Warcraft played into their relationship was necessary. Usually this led players to learn how to moderate playing habits by cutting down playing time, playing while their partners were unavailable, or engaging in activities in the game that required less focus even if their partner played as well. Non-playing partners were also mindful to make an effort to understand the game when it came to dating someone interested in WoW; they also recognized the importance of discussing and negotiating their concerns about the game with their partner.

While this study has focused on romantic relationships among young adults there are also implications concerning the general population. Many people are investing more and more of their time in virtual life outlets not only through MMOs like World of Warcraft and Second Life, but also in other public online activities like forums, social networking, blogging, and non-MMO online games. Taking part in larger online communities, therefore, should not be written off as trivial but should be recognized as offering a potential shift in communication and interaction methods as well as offering a wider array of activities and hobbies. Even more importantly, researchers should take interest in how this shift intersects with more traditional methods of maintaining relationships with others and the difficulties that this could pose.

Throughout the interviewing process, there were many other interesting themes that arose but were outside the scope of this study. Some of these themes merit further research. For example, researchers could benefit from comparing and contrasting real world and WoW personalities in order to learn how people behave differently (or similarly) between the two

realms. A study on addiction and stigma discourses could also help shed light on the current strain between the real and virtual worlds.

The current study has provided intriguing insights into the relationships of WoW players, but an important limitation of this research is its focused, convenience-based sample. Future research might build on the insights gleaned from qualitative interviews to develop survey items that might be employed with a larger, random sample of young adults in relationships. Such an approach would allow for the development of reliable research tools to assess the effects of WoW and related activities on relationships across a more representative sample. Applying the concepts from this study in a more quantitative, survey-based manner would also allow for testing specific hypotheses about the influence of WoW on young adults' relationships.

In addition to the limitation of convenience sampling, cognitive dissonance could have affected the data. According to Festinger (1957) a person will strive to have consistent perceptions, attitudes, and actions and if that individual believes there is an inconsistency within him or herself, an attempt to rationalize the inconsistency is made. However, these attempts are not always successful and can lead to "psychological discomfort" (p. 2). In regards to the interviews, although everyone gave the impression of candor, there could have been instances where an inconsistency between what interviewees were saying and what was truly happening in the relationship existed, even if they were unaware of this dissonance. Problems in the relationship or specific concerns about WoW may have been minimized because of the emotional investments in these realms and reluctance to see or acknowledge tensions.

Another element that should be further investigated is how relationships among WoW players compare with couples who do not take part in such an extensive virtual life. Since these

types of couples were not interviewed and this was not a random sample in the first place, comparisons cannot be drawn from these results. However, determining the differences and similarities between the two groups could yield some very interesting data and give further insight on WoW players and their relationships. Conversely, by focusing on couples in on-going relationships, the current research has excluded those people who may have the most serious difficulties in navigating WoW and relationships. More work is needed to examine how Wow might interfere with or hinder the development of intimate relationships among young adult players who are not currently in a relationship.

A longitudinal study would also be helpful. This study utilized a one-time, “snapshot” interview but being able to follow-up with previously interviewed couples could yield even more insight into how WoW affects relationships. Some partners could have parted ways and others could have progressed in their relationship (e.g., moving in together, marrying). Partners who played WoW could have also quit playing or non-playing partners could have begun playing. Regardless of any changes, conducting follow-up interviews could provide more information on the effects of WoW on relationships.

In addition to these suggestions, it would be interesting to narrow the demographics even further. Interviewing only the couples where both partners play WoW or only those where one person does not play could give more specific information on the relationship dynamics under these circumstances. In this study, there were some distinctions between couples where both partners played and those where only one person played, and solely focusing on either of these groups might present a clearer and more detailed picture of how these relationships interact with the game.

In closing, the narratives from couples involved in WoW provided a clearer picture of how romantic relationships in the material realm intermingled with virtual life in the form of online gaming. This study also illustrated how these interactions between lives could change the dynamic of a relationship in the ways that partners took on the task of understanding this alternate life and negotiated its presence. Although Putnam saw civic society as a dying element of humanity, the answer to what has happened to this aspect of society could be much more complex; the data presented have shown that civic society could be undergoing a transformation through technological advances. With these results, hopefully researchers will be provided with better insight concerning these changes and, in turn, be better equipped to study the effects of virtual life on the real world. Ultimately, this study had set out to demonstrate that World of Warcraft and similar games are not just forms of entertainment; they represent a significant shift in how people live and interact with each other in the modern world and how Putnam's long-lost bowling leagues may have moved to the world-wide-web.

APPENDIX A INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview Guide: Player

1. How long have you played World of Warcraft? How much do you play on a typical weekday? A typical weekend? Why do you play World of Warcraft?
2. Does your significant other play World of Warcraft? (If yes) how long has your partner played? How much does your partner play on a typical weekday? A typical weekend? Do you play together? Can you describe how you play together?
3. What other activities do you have besides school or work? Do you participate in these activities with other people and how much time do you spend doing these hobbies each week?
4. When playing World of Warcraft, do you play with other people within the game or do you prefer to play solo? If you do play with others, are they a set group of friends like a guild or random people?
5. (If they play with others) what kind of conversations do you have? Are they only about strategy within the game or do you talk about other things with each other? What kind of things do you talk about? How would you compare these people with your IRL (“in real life”) friends? Do you feel more connected with these people, less connected, or about the same?
6. What does your significant other think of WoW?
7. How long have you and your significant other been together? How did you meet?
8. Do you live together or separately?
9. How would you describe your relationship? Can you tell me any stories that you feel illustrates your relationship?
10. What type of activities do you do together? Are there some activities you and your significant other always do together? For example, do you always have lunch together or have a date night every Friday?
11. How does your family feel about the relationship? How does your significant other’s family feel about the relationship?
12. How do your friends and your significant other’s friends feel about the relationship?

13. Do you share a lot of mutual friends with your significant other, have a separate circle of friends, or a mixture of both?
14. Are there any particular ways that playing WoW has affected your relationship? Positively? Negatively? How did you and your significant other feel? How did you resolve the issue (if negative)? Were there ever any situations where your partner disapproved or felt jealous of your friends on WoW? Are there any stories you'd like to share on this topic?
15. Have you ever broken up or lost a relationship because of WoW? Did you learn anything from this experience?
16. How do you imagine your life would be like without this person? How much influence does your significant other have in your life on a day to day basis?
17. Is there any way you have changed yourself in order to improve your relationship? Are there any strategies you've had to develop in order to balance WoW and your relationship?
18. Where do you see your relationship going?

Interview Guide: Non-Player

1. Do you know how long your significant other has played World of Warcraft? How much does he/she play on a typical weekday? A typical weekend? Has he/she ever explained why he/she plays?
2. Has your significant other ever tried to get you interested in the game? Are there any stories about him/her trying to explain the game world or get you into playing?
3. Do you know who your significant other plays with on World of Warcraft? Are there any instances where he/she has talked to you about people on World of Warcraft? (If they know about their WoW friends) how would you compare these online friends to his/her real life friends?
4. What do you personally think of World of Warcraft? Any stories on what brought you to this conclusion?
5. How long have you and your significant other been together? How did you meet?
6. Do you live together or separately?

7. How would you describe your relationship? Can you tell me any stories that you feel illustrate your relationship?
8. What type of activities do you do together? Are there some activities you and your significant other always do together? For example, do you always have lunch together or have a date night every Friday?
9. How does your family feel about the relationship? How does your significant other's family feel about the relationship?
10. How do your friends and your significant other's friends feel about the relationship?
11. Do you share a lot of mutual friends with your significant other, have a separate circle of friends, or a mixture of both?
12. Are there any particular ways that World of Warcraft has affected your relationship? Positively? Negatively? How did you and your significant other feel? How did you resolve the issue (if negative)? Were there ever any situations where you disapproved of or didn't trust his/her friends on World of Warcraft? Are there any stories you'd like to share on this topic?
13. Have you ever broken up or lost a relationship because of World of Warcraft in the past? (If yes), how did this affect the way you handle your current relationship?
14. How do you imagine your life would be like without this person? How much influence does your significant other have in your life on a day to day basis?
15. Is there any way you have changed yourself in order to improve your relationship? Are there any strategies you've had to develop in order to balance your partner's gaming habits and your relationship?
16. Where do you see your relationship going?

APPENDIX B GLOSSARY

AFK: “Away from keyboard,” meaning a player is away from their computer. This can be used as an auto-response when other players attempt to communicate with someone who is no longer at their keyboard and cannot respond.

Aggro: The amount of threat that a computer-generated opponent retains on a given player. This term can also be used as a verb, e.g. a player might “aggro” a mob by attracting the attention of a crowd of opponents, raising their threat level, and causing them to attack.

AOE: “Area of effect”. This refers to in-game spells that affect multiple targets in a predetermined radius set by the game.

Arenas: Arenas refer to instances in which small teams of players engage in combat against one another. Unlike battlegrounds, arenas feature no team-based objective other than defeating the opposing team through combat. Arena teams can consist of two, three, or at most, five players.

Azeroth: The name of the world in which the majority of World of Warcraft is set. Azeroth consists of three continents: The Eastern Kingdoms, Northrend, and Kalimdor. Another major area of WoW includes Outland, which is located outside of Azeroth.

Battlegrounds: Areas in which large teams of players usually from opposing factions compete to either capture flags or areas within the battleground. Depending on the battleground, teams can consist of 10-40 players per faction.

Classes: A player’s class determines the style of fighting and type of equipment a character will utilize. Class also determines what types of powers, abilities, skills, and/or spells a character will gain through play. There are 10 possible classes to choose from, which are available to both

factions: paladins, warriors, hunters, druids, death knights, priests, mages, rogues, shamans, and warlocks.

DPS/Tanks/Healers: These terms refer to the three primary roles of players who are pursuing any type of group-based content. DPS literally means “damage per second,” and refers to those players which specialize in offensive output. As DPS players are normally quite frail in terms of defensive capabilities, a Tank is used to defend them. A tank is any player which causes high threat to any number of opponents, and specializes in absorbing massive amounts of damage. Healers, as their name suggests, usually stand to the side of the action and mend the various forms of damage inflicted by enemies in order to prevent any single player from dying.

Dungeons/Heroics: Dungeons is commonly interchanged with “instances” (see below). A heroic refers to a dungeon that has been changed by the group/party leader to be more difficult. This means that enemies are harder to defeat and groups require better strategies to complete the dungeon. Heroics also offer better items that would not be available in a normal-difficulty dungeon.

Elites: These are game-controlled creatures or humanoids that are more difficult than others to defeat in combat. They are denoted by a gold or silver dragon bordering their name plate and, unless it is a low-level elite character, a group is usually required to defeat it.

Expansions: Since the game was released in 2004, there have been three expansions added on to the original WoW (often called Vanilla WoW): Burning Crusade (BC), Wrath of the Lich King (WotLK), and Cataclysm (Cata). In BC, two new races were introduced (blood elves for the Horde and draeneis for the Alliance) and the planet Outland was added. WotLK introduced the continent of Northrend and the death knight class. Cata added the worgen (Alliance) and goblin

(Horde) races and while it did add some new areas on the map, this expansion mostly redesigned the existing map.

Faction: There are many minor factions within WoW but within this study, this refers to the two politically opposing factions of the Horde and the Alliance. Players choose between these two factions and one of six races that each faction offers when creating a character. Due to the history of the Horde and Alliance, the two factions are considered enemies within the game.

Gear: This term refers to the equipment that a player can outfit their character with in order to increase their prowess in any one of a number of roles and skills, especially combat. Each piece of gear has its own “stats” and each piece can be gained through various PVE and PVP activities such as quests or dungeons. Depending on the level and difficulty of the task, the worth and level of the gear will be greater.

Grinding: Grinding is the term players often use to refer to doing a certain action repetitively in order to raise their character level, reputation with certain factions, or expertise in certain skills (e.g. fishing, leatherworking, cooking, etc.). Grinding also implies that a player is attempting a difficult goal which requires many hours of playtime.

Guild: A guild is a defined group of players who can come together for group activities in WoW. Guilds also serve as a social atmosphere where previous acquaintances can socialize or relative strangers can create stronger bonds through playing together.

Instance: Dungeons, castles, and other confined areas can have sub-areas called instances. These are special areas in WoW where groups are able to interact with a dungeon without interference from other players or parties and can gain certain items that are unavailable through other means. “Dungeon” is sometimes used interchangeably with “instance”.

Leveling: This refers to the process of gaining more “XP” or experience points in order to increase a character’s level. Leveling can also refer to improving trade talents as well.

MMORPG: “Massively multiplayer online role-playing game”, which refers to the genre of game WoW belongs too. MMO is used as well at times.

PVE: “Player versus environment”. This refers to a player competing against computer-controlled occupants/content of the game.

PVP: “Player versus player” refers to players competing against other real players in various game environments.

Questing: Questing refers to a player who is actively completing quests. More specifically, a quest is a task that is given to a player by a computer generated character or item that usually requires the player to defeat a computer-generated enemy, collect a certain item, or complete an action. Upon completion of a quest, the player can receive experience points, gold, and/or items depending on the quest.

Races: WoW offers 12 races that players can choose from. The Horde includes trolls, orcs, goblins, blood elves, taurens, and the undead. The Alliance includes humans, night elves, gnomes, dwarves, the draenei, and worgens. Each race has a different starting point on the game’s map and the capability to pursue different classes. They also have unique histories and racial traits. There are other races within the game but these are the only playable choices.

Raids (10 man, 25 man): A “raid” refers to the act of entering a raid-specific instance with anywhere between five to 40 players depending on the instance that the raid party is entering. Players will often refer to raids as “10 man”, and “25 man”, denoting how many players a

specific raid should be completed with. Depending on the difficulty of a raid, they can sometimes take many hours to complete, with three hour raiding sessions not being unheard of. Many guilds will schedule raids in order to have all players present at the same time, typically scheduling one to three raids per week.

Server: Players can choose from multiple servers (also known as realms), which are usually divided by geographical location and are then further divided into four types of servers: PvE, PvP, RP, and RP-PvP. A PvE server means that players will not be attacked by a player from the opposing faction unless they consensually choose this option; players mostly participate in dungeons or raids. A PvP realm means that in addition to computer-generated enemies, other players from the opposing faction are free to attack each other; in addition to dungeons and raids, players usually participate in battlegrounds, arenas, and one-on-one duels. An RP, or role-playing realm, dictates that players adhere to the mythos of the game. This means creating a name that fits within the WoW universe and staying in character, which would include using the correct dialect of the character based on its race. Since the RP realms did not have the option for PvP, the most recent realm, RP-PvP, was created in 2005 that combined the role-playing element with the ability to combat other players.

Toon: Shortened from “cartoon”, toon refers to a player’s in-game character.

Wintergrasp: This area was introduced in Wrath of the Lich King and is the first non-battleground zone that is fully dedicated to PVP combat regardless of the type of server a player is on. Any player within the area when the battle begins can join in and either attack or defend the castle, depending on which faction won the previous battle.

XP: “Experience points”. A built-in, non-tradable “currency”, which measures the playability and worth of each players’ characters. Experience points can be gained by completing quests or slaying opponents within the game.

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