

Relinquishing and discovering **self**:
A case study investigation of gamer
identity in an online world.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Mirko Potzscher

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to gain a comprehensive understanding of implemented game design factors, various forms of identity creation, as well as the powerful hold of an avatar in the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. It has been my aim to find out if, and to what extent design elements of the game influence gamer identities and create an attractiveness to keep gamers playing and always returning to the online world. In addition, I have been curious about the number of gamer identities and how and to what extent the online environment influences offline identities.

The area of massively multiplayer online role-playing games is still not as well researched as other game genres. Research about *World of Warcraft* has been done in various areas. Authors wrote about the many hours they spent exploring the fictive world with their own avatars and articles focus on various aspects of the game, but are not about the identification of attracting factors for playing the game in combination with identity formation.

By contrast, this research provides an '*insider view*' gained by interviews and observation. The research presents that gamers have to be introduced to the game *World of Warcraft* in order to start and continue playing it. Gamers' motivation changes from personal success (fighting bosses and 'levelling up') and rewards as motivators at the beginning, when they explore the world of Azeroth by themselves, to satisfaction provided by community when gamers reach high levels, when they are about to play high-end content and join guilds, groups of like-minded gamers following the common goal of being successful in the online game *World of Warcraft*.

Reasons for this behavioural change are 'ease of communication', because multiple channels of communication are available, and communication barriers got eliminated. The presence of gamers with a

common interest and the reduction of face-to-face communication to a computer-mediated communication, without seeing the *real* person playing another avatar, made this change happen.

Playing together and talking to other gamers in a guild creates a *shared experience* and nourishes the *sense of belonging*. Spending long hours playing *WoW* together lets gamers develop friendships and trust and makes sharing of personal information more likely. Anonymity, provided by the avatar and its name, is likely to fade when socialization with fellow guild members increases. The research also explains why I believe that avatars in the game *World of Warcraft* are carrier of gamers' *real* life identities and how gamers' identities are influenced and shaped by both worlds, online and offline.

Time dedication in favour of the game also has negative consequences, such as isolation of gamers from the *real* world, family issues and personal problems, like unfinished degrees and unemployment, which are presented in this thesis.

Chapter 1

- Overview of the research -

1.1. Introduction to the concept of the research

For this study, one very specific online world, namely *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), is the focus of research. More than 11.5 million players worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008) make *World of Warcraft* the biggest and most successful Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. It has been my aim to find out if, and to what extent game design factors make the game so attractive that gamers keep playing *WoW* with intense concentration. Furthermore, I want to pay major attention to various forms of identity creation in *World of Warcraft* in order to understand what happens to gamers when they engage in the game, including the powerful hold of an avatar. The purpose of this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of all mentioned aspects.

This idea came to me when I thought about humans' communicational voyage from the past to the present. From images on walls, to spoken words, to written language. Evolution has been the central theme to mankind's history and therefore it is no surprise that the urge to communicate, to transfer messages and to express feelings has, instead, been crucial to social development. Face-to-face communication has been the most successful and the most meaningful way to communicate because hearing the words in context contributes to understanding meanings and also receiving an immediate reply and reaction is valuable and highly desirable. Pronunciation, visuals by means of non-verbal communication, and feelings extend the overall communication and enable smoother acquisition of understanding for the parties involved. Alongside my general interest in this area, my brother

was the trigger to make me research this area. *World of Warcraft* is his favourite game and he spends a lot of time playing it.

The knowledge that communication is important for the further development of the human race influenced my research topic, as did the extra interest in face-to-face communication. Furthermore, I have always wondered about my own identity and whether it changes while interacting with someone. By reading around this topic, I found out that identities were originally seen as fixed and stable, as the '*real me*', closely associated with *real* life. René Descartes spoke about the *Cartesian Self* and stated, "cogito ergo sum – I think therefore I am" (Hawkes, 2003, p. 63). However, this view has changed. Identity alters in accordance to its environment and is shaped by social interactions (Foucault, 1984). Discourse not only describes, but also defines identities (Bazerman, 2008; Fairclough, 1989). This moves identity from the non-changeable '*real me*' to an identity constructed over time, a process. Therefore, everyone lives in a process of continual creation and re-creation of the self. Knowing that identity is shaped by social interactions, identities have to be distinguished between *self-identity* and social identity, which implies that every person has at least two identities.

Faced with assessing the effects on identity of the multiple means of communication available in the 21st century, I was particularly struck by the power of the Internet, both to limit and enable formations of the self. I began to wonder whether people have different identities online from those in *real* life? How do they develop, and does that mean that every person has at least three identities then?

It seemed to me that the offline view that identity is formed over time must have changed with the introduction of Cyberspace. In the early days of the Internet, people could only use words because cyberspace was completely text-based, and therefore identity had to be created, or 'manufactured', from scratch. Neither picture nor voice that would have presented a certain identity could be shared online at that time and therefore identity presentation totally relied on written text. This situation has improved with the evolution of technology and advanced online options. People access cyberspace and are

identified by their Internet Protocol (IP) address, and not by who they *really* are. For instance, the online users' identities are created by a generated profile, which is based on websites visited, discussions participated in and files viewed and downloaded. These days, almost any digital media format can be saved, published and shared online and several communication methods, such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and Instant Messaging (IM), for instance, are available. Social interactions in online environments, in multiple communication formats, enrich the process of identity creation online and indicate that identities can be shaped online in similar ways they are created offline, in *real* life.

A conversation with my brother, a keen player of WoW, alerted me to the possibilities of exploring identity formation in games that are played online, in created online worlds. Original offline computer games like *Age of Empires*, *Command & Conquer* and *Diablo* have been extended with online modes, where people from multiple places using the Internet join the gaming platform. Online gaming and *virtual* worlds have thereby gained an important position in many people's lives and are more and more considered as a 'normal' place to spend time (Henttonen, 2008, p. 10). Besides this acceptance, online worlds, especially Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), are growing massively (Castronova, 2005, p. 58).

Vast amounts of time are spent in *World of Warcraft* and media often use the term *addiction* while talking about this mass phenomena. This study research, therefore, may be of interest to the whole community of gamers playing *WoW*. My research has the potential to show if and to what extend their identity changes between two different stages: offline and in-game online.

The project described is presented under the following name:

Relinquishing and discovering **self**: A case study investigation of gamer identity in an online world

The purpose of the research is to develop understanding of identities of people who play online computer games.

This thesis aims to answer the following research question:

In what ways does online gaming affect gamer identity?

As the question reveals, I contend that there is a correlation between online games and the identity-formation of players. This connection may be particularly significant in the case of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games because this genre of games involves a high level of social interaction that facilitates identity alteration.

1.2. Organisation of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters provides a comprehensive, systematic and understandable answer to the research question. This thesis does not conform exactly with the traditional structure of a thesis, because it includes an additional chapter, which provides background information about the game *World of Warcraft* before talking about the academic concepts on which the research is based. Chapter three presents the literature review that investigates gamer identity formation from different perspectives. This chapter introduces and applies concepts to the area of research and partly answers the research question 'In what ways does online gaming affect gamer

identity?'. Then, chapter four explains the methodology and the research methods used to gather and analyse the data presented in this thesis. The chapter shows how the researcher obtained an insider view that facilitates *Verstehen*¹ and the generation of knowledge that enables an answer to the research question. Chapter five presents the data gathered as a case study and is followed by the concluding chapter of this thesis, which offers discussion of the data collected and an extended answer to the research question.

¹ German word for *understanding*

Chapter 2

- Background of the study -

In most theses, chapter two presents the literature reviewed. In my case, I decided to add an extra chapter, a background chapter that eases the approach to the study, before presenting an overview of relevant literature. In this chapter, it is my aim to briefly talk about computer games in general at first. Then, I am going to be more specific by talking about the game that is the field of activity for this study: *World of Warcraft*. I am going to identify and discuss elements of *community* that can affect gamers' *social identity*.

2.1. Games

Mankind has always been fascinated by games, mainly as a free time activity that enhances socializing. Most games are played mainly for the fun they generate (Berger, 2002, p. 25). Spending special time together, laughing, telling stories, competing and the will to win are all features and incentives that make games a well preferred free time activity all around the world (Financial Times, 2008, p. 14).

Manual board games have been played for many years and new ones are still being released, despite the technologies available these days. Most games require a minimum of two players, which automatically involves socialization and interaction. Besides those 'fun' aspects of traditional gaming, games may also involve the ancient art of storytelling, which can make them even more interesting and entertaining.

A good example for such a game is a board role-playing game called *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*. One player being the ‘Dungeon Master’ tells the story and thereby determines the setting and main events taking place. Gamers create their own avatars and present them and their abilities to other gamers before the game starts. Gamers also describe all actions of their characters during the game. This behaviour emphasizes the storytelling element. Success, effects and consequences of gamers’ actions are decided by throwing dice. Based on that game’s success, a ‘visualization’ of the core elements of *D&D* – storytelling, adaptation of a role and ancient folklore – was created and its developers took it to the higher level of the online computer game. A ‘world’ was developed, characters, moves and visual effects were added and the offline computer game *Warcraft* was born.

2.2. *The game World of Warcraft*

The release of ‘*World of Warcraft (WoW)*’, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), advancing the offline computer game *Warcraft*, was a milestone in gaming history. *WoW* is played online and brings together people from all over the world. In December 2008, *World of Warcraft* had more than 11.5 million subscribers worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008) and has continued to grow. The game’s success, which is reflected in the number of participants, as well as by sales of the game and its expansion packs (*AddOns*) makes it arguably the “world’s most popular subscription-based massively multiplayer online role-playing game” (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) since its launch in 2004.

In order to participate in the game, players need to create an account and arrange a monthly payment. Once those tasks are completed, more important, game-related decisions have to be taken. Gamers have to choose an avatar, a character in the game *World of Warcraft*, through whom gamers are going to explore the world of Azeroth, which consists of three continents and several islands.

Avatars in *World of Warcraft* are not attractive in the sense of being beautiful. This is partly a function of the genre of the game (fantasy), but avatars have a particular appeal to gamers: they are all-powerful. Gamers can choose and develop their avatars' talents, as well as some aspects of their appearance. Also, since gamers will master many breath-taking quests and confront many opponents together with their avatars, they obtain a degree of companionship with their avatars.

The option to select and modify an avatar has consequences for the gamer and is particularly relevant to this study. Ten different races, divided into good and evil, are available at the time when *World of Warcraft classic*, and both AddOns, being *Burning Crusade (BK)* and *Wrath of the Lich King (WotLK)*, are installed. Those races are divided between two factions: Alliance (good, including Dwarfs, Gnomes, Humans, Night Elves and Draenei) and Horde (evil, including Orcs, Tauren, Trolls, Blood Elves and Undead). In addition to those decisions, gamers also have to choose whether they want a female or a male avatar. In contrast to the faction and race decision, the selection of the avatars' gender does not have any significance or influence on the characters' skills in the game – it is purely cosmetic.

Once all decisions are taken, avatars are ready to be guided by gamers' skills. The game does not allow avatars do not act themselves. Rather, gamers have full control and power is vested in the players, not the programme.

2.3. *Important aspects of the game*

World of Warcraft is structured in such a way that interaction with NPCs, non-playing characters², and other gamers is encouraged and mandatory for progressing, which goes hand in hand with 'levelling'. Levelling is the advancement of avatars by successfully fighting enemies and thereby gaining experience. Therefore, the game *World of Warcraft* seems to be built around community, both in-game and out-of-game, and community is so important to gamers that discussion of it occupies a large part of this chapter. The online WoW community involves several key concepts: (1) locality, (2) religion, (3) death, (4) common interest, (5) team play, (6) status and reputation, and (7) communication.

The Oxford English dictionary provides the following definition of community:

An organized [...] social body; a body of people living in the same locality; a body of people having religion [...] in common; a body of nations unified by common interests.
(Trumble & Stevenson, 2002, p. 464)

2.3.1. *Social body*

First of all, the definition mentions a "social body" (Trumble & Stevenson, 2002, p. 464), which consists of all the gamers, avatars, guilds and enemies in the world of Azeroth. As mentioned before, communication is required to advance in the game and sociality is the key to it. Social exchanges determine the ability of gamers to exchange important information to co-operate within the game and to advance within a guild. "Community" is determined by the quality of the communication that is developed within the social groupings of the game.

² NPCs act as quest keepers in the world of Azeroth

2.3.2. *Locality*

Locality in regards to *World of Warcraft* means the world of Azeroth. All factions and races inhabit specific areas and cities that are located within the borders of this world. It is a reasonable assumption that Azeroth's environment shape gamers in ways that are similar to the way that any environment influences identity. The environment determines cultures in ways of people's perceptions of beauty, the style houses are build and the materials they use, for instance. Also, fashion trends and cultures' traditional food depend on the environment a population lives in. France, especially Paris, is one of the fashion centres in the world and the French are also known for their excellent cuisine. As a consequence for the latter, meals last longer and are important parts of daily life. For *World of Warcraft*, effects of an environment on culture mean that the visual environment, the world of Azeroth, determines the culture in *World of Warcraft*. Avatars' physical appearance and options available to personalize avatars, for instance, as well as other aspects like the way avatars travel from one part of the world to another, and the way they communicate with each other are dictated by the environment created within the game. The world of Azeroth resembles a romanticized medieval society and therefore the overall atmosphere is one of high endeavour, elevated courage, formalised courtesy, and rules of engagement. The fact that *World of Warcraft* is a fantasy game that includes elements of magic and witchcraft supports the gaming experience.

2.3.3. *Religion*

Another aspect mentioned in the definition of community that is of interest for this research is religion. It is well known that religion supports people, but also influences them to behave in a certain way, and to form their identities along certain lines for certain purposes. Azeroth has no religion, and is therefore playable by, and attractive to, people from all over the world. At no stage of the game can players choose a religious group to belong to. No churches – of any kind – or religious symbols can be found in Azeroth.

2.3.4. *Death*

An unavoidable element in people's life cycles and also closely associated with religion is death. The end of people's lives is described in every religion, but especially relevant for this study is the belief of Buddhism (Sambhava, 1993) and Hinduism (Today, 2007) in reincarnation (Howarth & Leaman, 2001, p. 376). In most computer games, the avatar has a limited number of lives and the game is over once the last life is lost. Then, the gamer has to start all over, from scratch, from the beginning of the game again. The fact that this finite end does not exist in *WoW* makes it an aspect that has to be highlighted. The creators of *World of Warcraft* decided to make use of the already mentioned religious concept of reincarnation that is part of Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. However, this adaptation did not take place for religious reasons. It is the set up of the game and thereby a game design element.

Whenever avatars – without attention given to their expertise and equipment – die in combat, their mortal body falls, but their spirit is released and will 'reincarnate' at one of several specific points available in the game that are close to the fallen body: a graveyard. A floating angel in combination with a 'ghost mode', a different colour scheme, visualizes this stage of the game: everything is grey and white, and somewhat blurry and transparent. Please see a screenshot of the 'ghost mode'. After reincarnation, which is called '*resurrection*' in the game, the soul has to make its way back to the body to be re-united. Contrary to the situation in most games, as said before, avatars in the game *World of Warcraft* can die an infinite number of times without major consequences like the need to start the game from the very beginning again. Gamers do not lose previously collected items or any equipment when they are re-born. However, equipment will be damaged, thereby weakens the avatar, and repairs are required. Gamers have to invest in-game currency to repair their avatars' equipment and to be in the same situation they were in before they died in combat.

Certain races are given the option to learn resurrection spells during gameplay. Only priests, shamans and paladins can learn spell casting and it is an ability that only high-end level characters have capacity for. The spiritual

components of reincarnation and resurrection spells move humankind's wish for immortality and the idea of life after death to a new level in *World of Warcraft*.

However, death seems to be separated from the concept of immortality because time passes in the game, but nobody ages. Another supporting fact for the absence of a natural aging process is a non-existence of children in the world of Azeroth. In reality, the absence of a next generation would ultimately lead to the extinction of that society.

2.3.5. Common interest

The last part of the Oxford dictionary's definition of community talks about "a body of nations unified by common interests" (Trumble & Stevenson, 2002, p. 464). In the context of the game *World of Warcraft*, it is a body of factions and races on one hand, and a body of gamers from all over the world on the other.

Castronova (2007, p. 43) identified the most fundamental reason for gamers' interest in computer games as "a virtual world's entire existence is predicated on the provision of good experiences for the user. It has to be better than reality". As I have already said, people have primarily played games to have fun, but another obvious interest for all gamers is progress. In other words, success in the game matters, and is shown by the avatar's level and the equipment it acquires. Strength and power seem to be important criteria for gamers. Furthermore, the successful completion of quests in order to gain experience and level up, to get rewarded with relevant in-game items, or to get certain amounts of in-game currency (gold, silver, copper) are all incentives. These identified interests seem to be the only ones that all gamers playing *World of Warcraft* have in common. Others, like the possession of rare and fast flying mounts or being powerful spell casters, only apply to certain gamers and their avatars.

Even though all encouragements listed before are important for single gamers

only, it can still be argued that *WoW*'s population, which is divided in two factions with ten races each, is a community, "a body of nations unified by a common interest" (Trumble & Stevenson, 2002, p. 464). The most obvious 'common interest' is a combination of being successful, defeating dangerous and difficult bosses, and earning rewards. Gamers' *real* incentives for playing the game and accompanying changes to their identity will be identified in this study.

Beyond the definition of community, I want to look at various other aspects that define a community in video games: team play, status and reputation and communication. By doing so, I hope to be able to define what kind of community is existent in *World of Warcraft* and how it affects gamer identity.

2.3.6. Team play

The structure of the game and its requirement to form and join guilds in order to progress on higher levels demands team play. Gamers either team up in groups created on the spot, or in guilds that can be compared to benefit- and success-oriented clubs. Whatever gamers choose, fellow gamers will support them and they will not be alone anymore. This situation is beneficial for gamers in matters of learning from others, being rewarded for good performance, achieving more and being more powerful as a group overall.

Guilds are mutually beneficial relationships between players. Gamers voluntarily form and join groups and guilds and therefore show willingness to follow a looting system³ and to work not only for their individual benefit, but also for the advantage of all their allies. In addition to the ideas previously listed, guild life is important and supports the prediction that the game *World of Warcraft* is truly build around community. Only a few benefits of guilds, like raids and thereby access to more complex instances where more valuable rewards can be collected for instance, are actually dictated by the game's

³ Process of loot (items dropped by boss once defeated) distribution

design (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2011) – most arise because of the sense of community that exists in the game and the guild itself.

2.3.7. Status and reputation

Avatars gain experience for performing whatever task is proposed, no matter whether it is done alone or with a group of gamers. Interesting and important for this study is the fact that there is no case where avatars will not earn a little experience at least, which means that they follow a constant learning curve. At the same time, this also equals constant rewards that are motivators for gamers to continue playing the game and to always return to Azeroth.

2.3.8. Communication

Highly interesting, comprehensive and of special interest regarding gamer identity are the options and opportunities to communicate in *World of Warcraft*. Communication is a major element of socialization and community. It is crucial for gamers and their avatars in order to progress. Tasks are given, strategies are discussed and key information is gathered only by talking to non-playing characters and actively playing gamers. Various drivers of communication support the communal spirit. Gamers can use the build-in chat function to send messages to other players in *World of Warcraft* at any time. This 'computer mediated face-to-face communication' that Blizzard Entertainment built into the game is a way to talk to other gamers in *World of Warcraft* and to receive an immediate reply without using third party programs. *WoW* offers gamers several chat channels: one can *whisper*, *tell* and *yell* the message. Other gamers can even be muted, when that conversation is not desired to take place. The equivalent in *real* life would be to finish a conversation and walk away. An alternative to the chat feature are messages sent via *virtual* mail, but it takes longer, gamers have to go to a mailbox in villages in the world of Azeroth and check for it, and an immediate reply is therefore not possible. In addition to all channels of communication

outlined before, gamers can also talk with each other in *real* time by making use of a third party program called *TeamSpeak*. This program is most frequently used for communication between guild members on high-end level. Any information can be shared quickly via this “crystal clear, cross-platform voice communication” (TeamSpeak Systems GmbH, 2011). The only extra equipment required is a headset with a microphone.

Body language, by the means of arm movements and hand gestures, is used to symbolize a vital communication with another avatar. However, that indicator cannot be found when gamers chat with each other. It only happens when gamers make their avatars talk to a non-playing character (NPC) in Azeroth. Otherwise, communication between gamers takes place without the need of avatars standing still and visually talking to someone. Avatars simply do whatever task they are asked to perform while the conversation takes place.

2.3.9. Raids and boss fights

Gamers who have reached the highest level in *World of Warcraft*, who are experienced and play their avatar in a professional way, and who have powerful armour and weapons to play high-end content join guilds. Guilds are formations of like-minded gamers who seek to finish difficult tasks and fight difficult bosses that only groups on high-end level can do. Guilds therefore have recurring events called raids, where 25 gamers are required and that take place several times a week, for about four to five hours each. A raid consists of an instance, a long mission that has multiple places in the world of Azeroth as a setting, and that involves several boss fights that last a maximum of fifteen minutes each. The latter is the most important part of boss fights because defeating one boss clears the way to the next that is more difficult and powerful than the one before. The goal is to successfully battle the final boss that requires teamwork and skills of all raid participants on a

professional level. After the last boss has lost his life, the loot⁴ is distributed amongst all raiders, using a loot distribution system that includes rolling dice, an element of gambling, and use of 'Dragon Kill Points (DKP)'⁵.

All provided background to this study shows that the question of community definitely stands in the foreground of *World of Warcraft* and therefore the statement of *WoW* being build around community can be easily supported. This situation has consequences for gamers' personal and social identities. The way in which it affects those will be explored and explained in the following chapters.

⁴ Items dropped by boss once defeated

⁵ Gamers earn DKP for participating in Raids (1 DKP per hour, 4 DKP per full raid, 15 DKP for first kill of a heroic boss, etc.) and can use DKP to 'buy' loots. Gamer with highest DKP offer gets the specific loot that was bid on.

Chapter 3

- Literature Review -

The first chapter explained how the research area and question were identified, and it gave an outline of the research's purpose and the concepts, which will be explored. The second chapter provided a general background to *World of Warcraft* that is the focus of this study. Chapter three contains a review of relevant literature, divided into the following sections:

- 3.1. Online identity
- 3.2. Computer games
- 3.3. Social identity

All literature was chosen in order to facilitate a reply of the research question 'In what ways does online gaming affect gamer identity?'

Gamers live in the *real* world but enter gaming platforms to play computer games like *World of Warcraft*. For this reason, I talked about *self-identity* that alters in accordance to its environment and that is shaped by social interactions (Foucault, 1984) in chapter one and assume that it is possible to discover different identities of people living their lives in the *real* world and playing games online. With that knowledge about identities and the research question in mind, the first section of this chapter will be explored.

3.1. *Online identity*

3.1.1. *Application of Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) on virtual environments*

At first, one needs to have a look at the past and older theories that are helpful in this matter. Original theories about group psychology always dealt

with specific groups with physical contact in *real* life (Festinger, 1954; Sherif, 1967). Then, Tajfel (1970) was able to prove that just cognitive categorization alone is enough to encourage group behaviour. This is referred to as self-categorization theory.

3.1.2. *Deindividuation and the SIDE-model*

An advancement of the social identity theory is the *Social Identity of Deindividuation Phenomenon (SIDE)*, which was developed by Reicher, Spears and Postmes (1995), and which has its origin in LeBon's concept of submergence (Reicher et al., 1995, 162). Deindividuation is fundamental in *virtual* environments and any other form of computer-mediated communication in general, providing perfect premises for deindividuated behaviour by the lack of physical contact (e.g. face-to-face communication), specific characteristics and the possibility to stay anonymous. Anonymity means that the likelihood of *personal identity* being uncovered is largely reduced, or even non-existent. Furthermore, anonymity impacts on personal accountability and can therefore lead to antisocial behaviour. Zimbardo (2007, p. 304) explains the effect of anonymity the following way: "Peaceful when identifiable, murderous when anonymous, peaceful again when returned to the identifiable condition". The concept of anonymity can be applied to computer games and will be discussed in regard to *World of Warcraft* within the context of this research about gamers' identities.

3.2. *Computer games*

The computer games sector is rapidly changing and generates an annual income of about US\$ 54 billion (PC Gaming Alliance, 2009) for the computer game industry per year. Nonetheless, it is the effect of the product, the game, in combination with the commercial drive and its capacity to take over people's lives that verify and urge studies of computer games. Carr, Buckingham, Burn, & Schott (2005) detail "a range of concepts and strategies

that can be applied in the analysis of computer games” (p. 179). Although Carr et al. do not focus on specific games, they identify “a variety of communicative models (speech, song, sound, writing, visual design)” (Carr et al., 2005, p. 12), which contribute to making games an enjoyable and entertaining experience. Castronova (2007) also addresses such models in his book *Exodus to the virtual world – How online fun is changing reality*, outlining the importance of game design.

Within the context of computer games and this research’s purpose, gamer identities, Carr et al. (2005) and Castronova (2007) stress that fun and escapism are essential elements of the online world.

3.2.1. *Fun and escapism*

“A virtual world’s entire existence is predicated on the provision of good experiences for the user. It has to be better than reality” (Castronova, 2007, p. 43). Based on the situation that people primarily played games to have fun, Castronova (2007) predicts that “over the next generation or two, hundreds of millions” of people will join the “20 or 30 million people [by the time the book was written] in worlds of perpetual fantasy” (p. xiv). Later, people also used it to escape the *real* world, their *real* surroundings for a while. This escapism, the “departure from the *real* world, an opportunity for an audience to let go of everyday anxieties in favour of an unreal experience” (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2007, p. 221) includes a getaway from gamers’ problems as well (Ragein Productions, 2007). This concept is important for game design. Obviously, the design really has to be absorbing, stimulating and appealing alike so that gamers are amazed by the *virtual* world’s attractiveness and are drawn to immerse themselves in the new environment, and even decide to escape the *real* world (Steuer, 1992). Technology advances constantly and so do *virtual* worlds. There either are updates of currently existing worlds available or new *virtual* worlds will be developed, which are more and more appealing to people.

Being aware of the attractiveness of *virtual* environments and the fun they generate, this knowledge should be brought together with the previously discussed aspect of deindividuation to learn more about gamer identities.

3.2.2. *Deindividuation and computer games*

As outlined before, deindividuation creates anonymity and therefore can lead to behavioural changes. In most computer games, gamers play a set character and use that identity, so as to avoid unveiling their *real* identity. Zimbardo (2007) names it a “metamorphosis” (p. 298) that takes place once people enter the *virtual* world of games. Gamers change from their *real* self to the character in the game and act according to the game’s demands, accepting the behavioural adaptation that takes place. The intensity of change depends on the kind of computer game played, the game’s environment and the actions that have to be performed in the game (Cover, 2006).

In regard to the game *World of Warcraft*, deindividuation takes place in a slightly modified way to what was described previously. Gamers do not play a pre-set character, but choose one from various available races and modify its appearance in order to personalize it. Furthermore, gamers can name their avatars. All these aspects limit the extent of anonymity, but do not remove it completely. In addition, it is the gamers’ choice how much the chosen name for the avatar unveils about the personal identity.

However, an important aspect of deindividuation theory stays unchanged: the avatar and the accompanying anonymity alike act as a mask and allow a change of behaviour. Wearing a mask means one is perceived as someone else, as a different identity (Clark, 2010). Thus, wearing a mask is often part of a spectacle, like the Venice masquerade. However, masked balls are not the only spectacle: we live in a society where spectacle is omnipresent (Boltanski, 1999, p. 176; Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 5 - 6) and therefore it is no surprise that online environments use the same concept. In this context, Baudrillard (1994, p. 30) spoke about “dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of

life in TV". The same idea can be used for games and is valid if the word TV is replaced by either the word 'game' to keep it general, or by replacing it with the name of a specific role-playing game like *World of Warcraft*. Furthermore, it would be more adequate to use the word *transition*, instead of dissolution, because one does not get completely lost and dissolves in the other situation, but elements from one side are transferred to the other and vice versa. In the context of MMORPGs, especially *WoW*, Baudrillard's concept and the adaptation of it mean that gamers might experience situations when the *virtual* world blends into the *real* world, or elements of the *real* world blend into the game.

The term masquerade, as mentioned before, includes the word mask, which stands for a transformation "into animal, monster or freak" (Simon, 2003, p. 16) and thereby clearly highlights the ability to provide anonymity by hiding the original face. There never is THE mask, but there is a huge variety of masks in existence (Sorell, 1973, p. 8; Mack J. , 1994, pp. 9 - 10). The easiest way to start an exploration of the kinds of masks is by dividing masks into good and evil. Within these two sections, there are various, maybe even countless nuances, in the sense of numerous extents of either happiness or evilness, available. The best example to explain this concept would be clowns. Some are happy, some are sad and others are evil. Clowns can change the way they are perceived by others by slightly modifying their mask, their identity, by facial expressions, by making faces at others. Speaking of perception: the intention of a mask and the perception of that mask's meaning by others can vary (Rock, 1984). Taking this into consideration, then a mask could be mis-interpreted and the person behind the mask would be treated in a way different from his or her intention. Another aspect of masks is that they have the capacity to hide (Simon, 2003, p. 16), to withhold something, which, in return, can have beneficial or negative consequences. A positive outcome would be unbiased conversation with and treatment of a disabled person for instance. In this context, the masked identity eliminates disabilities and other aspects that are seen as 'not normal' by society (Brauer & Escoriza, 2009). In contrast, an unconstructive result would be misjudgement of masked people and therefore the creation of biases, which could even lead to

mistreatments in means of verbal abuses, disregards and isolation, for instance.

World of Warcraft is a spectacle world, where nothing is *real*, but everything is *hyper-real* (Baudrillard, 1988). Actually, the kind of gameplay, the role-play, gives gamers fruitful ground to create new identities in the game by wearing a *mask* and by acting in accordance to the new role. Gamers are given the choice of various masks in form of different races for avatars. As Zimbardo (2007) outlined, deindividuation includes behavioural change (p. 301), which can be shown by the fact that avatars in *World of Warcraft* all represent power by being warriors, paladins, or warlock, for instance. However, gamers “produce a [power in the game] independent of themselves” (Debord, 1995, p. 23). The game requires gamers to use the avatars’ power and skills to succeed. This requirement can be seen as a permission to demonstrate combative spirit, which reduces gamers’ “sense of personal accountability” (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 301). LeBon (1895) argues that group situations affect people – they change their behaviour and lose “the sense of individual responsibility” (in Reicher et al., 1995, p. 162). LeBon’s theory is not entirely correct in reference to *World of Warcraft*, because groups, especially guilds, are formed based on a selection process for members and therefore members are known and responsible for their actions in the group.

Regardless of the avatar’s state, as an individual or as a member of a group or guild in *WoW*, the avatar can be seen as a ‘uniform’ that enforces the loss of *personal identity* (Zimbardo, 1969, p. 255). If the avatar represents a uniform, then clothes and armour, that can be changed and upgraded over time spent in *WoW*, represent a modification of that uniform. The avatars’ appearance changes along with durability of armour and better fighting and spell casting skills, depending on the chosen character class. This returning change, or modification of uniform might reinforce the loss of *self-identity*. As Zimbardo (2007, p. 305) says, “deindividuation creates a unique psychological state in which behaviour comes under the control of immediate situational demands and biological, hormonal urges”.

Existence of one, but discovery of a new identity in the game supports the purpose of this research about gamer identities and opens room for a new aspect: migration.

3.2.3. *Migration*

Besides escapism and deindividuation, there also is the concept of migration. In the *real* world, migration is mainly one way. People might move from one area to another in search for better living standards, including a job and a salary that makes surviving possible, which can be seen as a form of escapism (Castronova, 2005, p. 71). The next level of regional migration is the move to another country, and not only another region within a certain country. This kind of migration can be, often was and still sometimes is bi-directional. An example would be the early stages of Polynesian settlement, for instance. The ease with which settlers could return from Pacific islands to their home countries determined the order in which the islands were settled (Irwin, 1992, p. 62).

Another form of migration can be found in animal kingdom, where birds are the best representatives for such. Every winter, a certain percentage of birds fly South to warmer areas. Once winter is over, they re-migrate to the area, the country they departed from (Elphick, 2007, p. 10). Based on that behaviour, birds' migration can be classified as a returning two-way migration. In regard to migration and computer games, platform migrations, the movement from offline (e.g. console and PC) to online (servers); or the migration of gamers in the matter of a change between games are the most talked about.

In *virtual* worlds, a new wave, a 'continuous' migration, a back and forth movement between online and offline life, very similar to birds' migration, can be identified. This constant departure into unreal environments and return to *real* life can be explained by the ease with which that migration is performed. Online worlds are always available, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and are

just a mouse-click away. Due to the closeness of 'places', gamers are more tempted to perform a migration (Hickey, 2002, p. 66). The procedures of 'logging in' and 'logging out' can be easily performed and there is no barrier that has to be overcome in order to do so. A continuous migration also leads to a comparison of both worlds, which might reach the point where the "real world will be forced to become more like a fantasy game" (Castronova, 2007, p. 70). Another approach would be to see the *virtual* world as "superior" (Debord, 1995, p. 22), more *real* and pleasant than earth and thereby make it home. Steuer (1992, p. 80) explains that the psychological phenomenon of *presence*, "the sense of being there", is caused and supported by two criteria: vividness and interactivity. In addition to the feeling of being at a different place, presence also implies sensorial absorption that blurs the perception of the game as fictional and material. Lombard and Ditton (1997) call it "perceptual illusion of nonmediation" (p. 5). This would explain the vast amounts of time gamers spend in online worlds (Debord, 1995, pp. 23 – 24). Migration in *virtual* worlds cannot be compared to migration in *real* life because a physical migration does not take place. The *real* person can be at any place in the world, only in need of a computer with Internet access and a program, a game, to enter *virtual* worlds. This basically is a detachment from the *real* body – only the spirit goes online and acts in the game in form of the chosen avatar. The body stays behind, placed on a chair in front of a computer in the *real* world.

The idea of a separation of body and soul is most likely taken from *reincarnation*, the rebirth of the soul in a new body, which is a fundamental belief in Buddhism, for instance. However, the change of bodies only takes place in one way, not the other way around. Therefore, the bird migration is a more adequate way to explain what happens in *virtual* worlds than reincarnation, although the latter is implemented in many online games like *World of Warcraft*, for instance. In *WoW*, a combination of one-way and returning migrations takes place, due to inter-regional and inter-continental travel. In this context, migration can be classified as either final or temporary. Certain quests might require the avatar to travel, or migrate, to another area or continent for a longer period of time, until the quest is fulfilled and before a

return to the departure point is advisable. The consistent requirement to travel in *WoW* gives the impression that the gamer and his avatar never really are at home, neither at rest. The mind must be in constant striving mode and physiological reactions, like raised blood pressure for instance, could be possible consequences.

By taking up the idea of wearing a mask or uniform when playing *World of Warcraft* at this point and by following the concept of migration, Zimbardo (2007) uses the example of men at war in order to explain a “reverse-transformation” that is dictated by the culture and that makes soldiers “return to their former personal and peaceful demeanor” (p. 304). Zimbardo (2007) also refers to a return to the *real* world where gamers live a more or less normal life after they ‘logged out’ of the game.

World of Warcraft is not only about exploring a new world and fighting enemies, but also communication plays an important role. It even has an effect on gamers’ identities and will therefore be explored further.

3.2.4. Drivers of communication

Playing computer games is often seen as isolation from the *real* world. The counter-argument to escapism and isolation is that gamers actually do not isolate themselves, but they move onto a platform where communication is possible around the clock (Castronova, 2007, pp. 173 ff.). Randomly starting a conversation and talking to a lot of different people from all over the world is much easier in cyber worlds and happens much more often online than one would think. Different channels of communication are not missing either. Exchange of news, opinions, knowledge, etc. is realized by written text in forums and by sending mail within *World of Warcraft*. IMs⁶, VoIP⁷, video, *TeamSpeak* and even *Skype* (Bennett & Beith, 2007), which is based on VoIP and makes calling gamers possible, can equally be used. Gestures and specific body movements are used to visualize communication in *WoW*.

⁶ Instant messages

⁷ Voice over Internet Protocol

Computer-mediated communication breaks down barriers and allows and encourages communication in *real* time. This phenomenon can be explained with the *reduced social cues approach*, where a lack of people's background information often leads to a more vivid, more open and more relaxed (and maybe even equal) inter-personal communication than during face-to-face communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984).

However, an encouragement of communication online, based on numerous communication channels available and the ease of communication that goes hand in hand with it can equally cause a discouragement of communication in *real* life (Robinson & Davis, 2001). In case of *World of Warcraft*, gamers have to cope with vast amounts of in-game action. In addition to the constant action, gamers must communicate with other gamers to discuss strategies and spell usage for instance, which are preferably either performed via instant messages (chat) or via *TeamSpeak* (voice chat). At the very same time, gamers are separating themselves from their surroundings by sitting in a room, staring at a monitor, wearing a headset that enables them to hear the game's music and sound effects, as well as other gamers' conversations, combined with the option to engage in verbal game-related communication by using the microphone. *WoW* therefore requires a much higher level of attention and the gamer must be *in* the game all the time because of the on-going, never ending structure of the game. By-standers, or people playing *World of Warcraft* for the first time, will find it very difficult to manage that information overflow, which can only be handled well with multi-tasking abilities that gamers have to learn over time in order to succeed in the game. Playing video games not only enhances in-game performance, but may also have positive effects on visual and attentional skills in *real* life (Boot, Kramer, Simons, Fabiani, & Gratton, 2008). However, situations of information and stimulation overflow raise the question if gamers are capable to notice events taking place around them, like people entering the room or weather conditions changing outside, for instance, or if they are so very focused on the game that they forget everything else?

This question generates ideas about selective perception and relates to the concept of *Inattentional Blindness (IB)*. Even IB suits and supports the research concerned with gamers' identities.

3.2.5. *Inattentional Blindness (IB)*

Johansson (2008, p. 176) states "human vision not only detects motion directions in man and animals, but also distinguishes different standard types of [...] motion patterns". Taking this for granted and as a starting line for theories and studies regarding visual detection, perception and recognition, one should expect people to notice unexpected and uncommon stimuli. In contradiction to Johansson's theory (2008, p. 176), various field studies conclude that a significant number of people observed and interviewed did not see such intentionally placed stimuli. A specific terminus for these research findings was introduced and explained by Simons (2000). He called the effect *Inattentional Blindness* and says it is "how well observers can ignore something they expect but know to be irrelevant" (p. 147). By relating this statement to multiplayer online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft*, one has the situation of gamers being *in* the game and dedicating their full attention to the game itself and all 'expected' happenings in order to be successful and helpful for the guild alike. 'Unexpected' events like a family member or friend opening the door and entering the room, or a phone call coming in would be classified as rather 'unimportant' in relation to the required performance and attention given to *WoW*. In order to see an unexpected 'unimportant' stimulus, the human mind has to perceive it. This process includes the capture of attention, which generates conscious awareness of the stimulus (Mack & Rock, 2000, p. 228).

3.2.6. *Perceived reality*

The concept of perceived reality explains how well the receiver perceives content presented by the media as reality. The foundation for an explanation

are two dimensions, the *magic window* and the *social expectations*, that help analysing *truth* of content distributed on television (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Hawkins, 1977). The latter dimension expresses the similarity of content presented on television and the existing knowledge of the audience. On the other hand, the *magic window* measures the degree of authentic or inauthentic presentation of reality on TV. Furthermore, depending on the intensity of consumption, it can affect the TV viewers' emotions and behaviour (Potter, 1986). With some modification, the basic idea of perceived reality can be applied to *World of Warcraft* as well. Castronova (2007) speaks about change that is taken from the game to *real* life. This, combined with perceived reality, would actually mean that the world of Azeroth in *WoW* might be perceived as more *real* than reality and could therefore blur reality.

3.2.7. *Self-actualization and identity formation*

Self-actualization of gamers goes hand-in-hand with the previously outlined concepts. It is achieved by actively engaging in shaping the story of the game while playing MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* (Oram & Newman, 2006). In *WoW*, gamers create an avatar (Bennett & Beith, 2007), a resident of the game, which is a *virtual* representation of the actual person, the gamer (New Media Consortium, 2007, p. 5). By being intensely engaged in the game, people playing *WoW* actively write their own avatar's story and thereby move closer to it. Identity formation is an evolving process over time in *WoW*, just as in *real* life (Foucault, 1984). Gamers' avatars' appearance and behaviour shape fellow gamers' perception of the users' identity.

Having introduced several concepts referring to and supporting gamers' identities, attention will now be given to the importance of game design and resulting consequences from game play for the future in general.

3.2.8. *Game design*

When speaking about the work of game designers, one could see the “developer as engineer” (Flynt, 2006). This describes experiments with *virtual* worlds and the creation of *virtual* environments in search of fun for users, which was identified as the primary reason to play games (Carr et al., 2005; Castronova, 2007). This view is different from the “hedonic game theorists” who “use psychology and game theory to explore the theoretical connections between society, choice and happiness” (Castronova, 2007, p. 111).

Game design is public policy design and therefore game designers can also be seen as politicians of the online world. They set rules for *virtual* worlds in the same way the government sets rules for the offline world (Castronova, 2007, p. 110). The main difference between both ‘designers’ is the way policy gets adapted. Online, new policies are tested over a period of time and are then modified according to feedback and information gathered (Castronova, 2007, pp. 114 – 115). Once all changes are implemented, another test takes place. If successful, then there is no reason for it not to be published. Unfortunately, there is no, or hardly any testing and modification in the *real* world. Politicians make policies without a chance for the public to interfere and give feedback.

3.2.9. *Future consequences*

Online games will affect and bring change to *real* life in the future, if they have not already done so. Beck and Wade (2004), both business school professors wrote and published a book based on the impact of games. It’s called *Got game: How the gamer generation is reshaping business forever* (2004). Like Castronova (2007), the authors of *Got game* (2004) looked at abilities gamers achieve by playing games. They found out that these abilities, namely multitasking, risk management and leadership skills, actually are those required by companies. In that sense, the change brought about by games to reality, as Castronova (2007) emphasises, will be the acceptance, an

acknowledgement that playing games is not just for fun and a waste of time, but is beneficial for personal development as well. Although there is still prejudice against games and gamers, people playing computer games might get more chances to prove their ability to multitask, to perform risk management and to show how good their leadership skills are in the near future. At that time, the misconception of gamers isolating themselves from society might be proven wrong as well.

Literature and information about formation of and influences on gamers' identities were collected and looked at offline and in-game online levels in this chapter already. Now, based on the previous, the third and last level, social identity, will be explored.

3. Social identity

The individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership. (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292)

Bennett and Beith (2007) realized correctly that Second Life, a "multiuser-virtual environment (MUVE)" (Diehl and Prins, 2008, p. 101), is "a potent medium for socializing – it provides people with a way to express, explore and experiment with identity". The same applies to *World of Warcraft*, which seems to be build around community. This explains the argument of Walker (cited in Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2007, pp. 307 – 310) that the existence of a network of quests makes '*World of Warcraft*' the successful game it has been in the past and it will remain in the future.

As we know by now, identity aspects often play a major role in games, especially in *World of Warcraft*. Once gamers start interacting with fellow gamers, join groups and even guilds, the online *self-identity* will then develop a social identity in the game that can have fundamental impacts on gamers' *real* lives. A major concern is the loss of *self-identity*, which can happen to deindividuated gamers in a group situation (Diener, 1979, pp. 1168 - 1170).

3.3.1. Group cohesiveness

Guilds are a specific form of groups in *World of Warcraft* – they are larger than teams, more consistent and often have a member-selection-procedure in place. Group cohesiveness, which is generated by specific conditions, can be found in such social formations. Particular reasons are (I) personal and (II) social attraction (Schachter, 1951, p. 192). In this context, Prentice, Miller and Lightdale (1994) distinguish into two groups: “common-bond” and “common-identity” (p. 484). Common-bond groups are defined as groups where friendships between group members are established and represent the main incentive to stay in the group. Such groups’ foundation is personal attraction. In contrast, common-identity groups, are “based on direct attachments to the group identity” (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994, p. 484) – in other words the group’s social attraction. A clear distinction between personal and social attraction to groups in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games might not be possible to find and therefore one should expect a combination of reasons to stay affiliated with a group. In-game groups can be seen as a community and therefore the sociological concept of community attachment, which is based on Durkheimian theory and which “is defined as an individual’s commitment to neighbours and community” (Hickey, 2002, p. 69), can be applied. It consists of two parts that both include psychological (humans’ need for social ties), economic and sociological (social relations) dimensions: (a) social involvement and (b) subjective feelings for the community (Hickey, 2002, pp. 69 - 70). Based on this definition, one can easily understand the strong relationships and intense dedication to the guild and friends in *World of Warcraft* that “transform individuals [e.g. gamers] into groups [e.g. guilds]” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 21).

This understanding of social ties in *World of Warcraft* is extended by the existence of social exchange in the game, being the ‘sharing of social rewards and social costs among people’ (Stangor, 2004, pp. 58 – 59). For gamers playing *WoW*, social rewards are friendships, socialization, someone to talk to, even about out-of-game topics, help and support. Social cost, on the other

hand, are flaming (blaming of other gamers for mistakes done in the game), guilt that results from flaming and “maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships” (Stangor, 2004, p. 59) between gamers of *World of Warcraft*. The latter, in other words, refers to time and effort that is required for an enjoyable time in *WoW*.

In addition to the gained understanding about in-game transformations and social exchange, two kinds of presence are categorized in *WoW*: physical presence, “the sense of being there”, and social presence, “the sense of being together with another” (Biocca, Harms, & Gregg, 2001). In regard to the game of interest, and by referring to IJsselsteijn (2004), there is a third kind of presence, a combination of both previously named: a co-presence that creates shared identity. It is characterized by “a sense of being together in a shared space at the same time” (IJsselsteijn, 2004, p. 136), which perfectly applies to the game *World of Warcraft*. *WoW* is, as mentioned before, build around community, and so many gamers meet online in a *virtual* environment, namely the world of Azeroth, at the same time and interact with each other. This co-presence is hosted on servers with capacities of hundreds and thousands of gamers playing *WoW* simultaneously.

3.3.2. *Social Identity Theory (SIT)*

In 1979, Tajfel and Turner developed and defined the Social Identity Theory (SIT), also known as self-categorization theory. It consists of three different stages: (1) social categorization, (2) social identification and (3) social comparison.

3.3.2.1. *Social categorization*

Social categorization is the process of people categorizing objects and other people by grouping them (Stangor, 2004, p. 112). New Zealanders, Samoans, Europeans, but also gamers, workers and even Buddhists are such

categories for instance. In regard to this research, people see themselves as gamers. Once that categorization process is completed, people select the group they belong to, feel most comfortable in or want to see themselves as a member of. People are not limited to one, but can belong to several different groups and their behaviour is influenced by the code of conduct of every single group (Petersen & Krings, 2009). When high-end level is achieved, the game *World of Warcraft* allows gamers to become members of a guild. Then, gamers will definitely check options available and apply for membership with the guild they feel most associated with. However, in *WoW* they have to choose and are only allowed to be a member of one guild at a time.

3.3.2.2. *Social identification*

In the next step, social identification, people get involved with the chosen group(s), adopt its code of conduct and identify themselves as a member of it (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Membership is important because it fosters the feeling of belonging to a group (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007) and leads to dedication and emotions such as proudness (Smith & Leach, 2004, p. 298; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the case of *WoW*, gamers become a member of one chosen guild after their application got accepted and a trial period was passed successfully. Pride for having achieved that goal is guaranteed and most likely only one amongst others.

3.3.2.3. *Social comparison*

The last of those three stages is social comparison, where the group(s) categorized and identified with are compared to other groups (Shipley, 2008). A ranking system in the game *World of Warcraft* is in existence for that purpose – it makes guilds aware of other guilds' progress and makes them compete with them. The willingness to advance the own group links back to social identification, where a feeling of belonging and proudness was developed. In contrast to real life, *virtual* groups have the feature to form and

remain without physical contact, but expectations and findings from social identity theory are still applicable.

3.3.3. *Social comparison and social distinctiveness*

When gamers are members of a guild and hence part of a group fighting for a common goal, social comparison will occur. It refers to “comparisons between one’s own attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and those of others” (Hogg, 1992, p. 91).

Comparing knowledge and mind-sets with others can generate truth (Schaefer & Dervin, 2009). Therefore, whatever creates consensus is often seen as truth. It also shows that people tend to favour and trust the in-group and information distributed within that group, compared to information coming from the out-group (Lei & Vesely, 2010). It is unclear to what extent this behaviour should be seen as positive and beneficial, but it fosters and extends social ties to all group members.

Inter-group behaviour includes all behaviour between different groups. It incorporates inter-group differentiation, the distinction of the own group (in-group) from other groups (out-groups), on the basis of social categorization. The game *World of Warcraft* allows a pre-categorization of such by providing the choice between two factions: Alliance (good) and Horde (evil). The goal of every guild to reach positive social distinction creates the *in-group bias*, a systematic overestimation of the own group (in-group) compared to other groups (out-groups). The *in-group bias* is omnipresent in *WoW*, but the game is structured in such a way that guilds’ status and successes are mirrored in a ranking system that indirectly indicates how well the *in-group* and its members are performing. The ranking also allows a comparison of the *in-group* with other guilds, the *out-groups*.

I reviewed literature with regard to the purpose of this research, gamers' identities, and presented my findings in the current chapter. Some theories have only been applied for different purposes so far, but would work for MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* as well. Therefore, I am going to test and prove their validity in this research about gamers' identities. The following chapter is going to explain methodology and methods I applied.

Chapter 4

- Methodology and method -

4.1. *Explanation of methodology for this research*

This research concerning gamer identities in an online world was conducted in the interpretive paradigm, which was chosen because of my personal desire to explore and understand human behaviour in a specific situation in a very deep and rich way. As Bandura (1977, p. 22) says, "from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed", and understanding behaviour in order to understand gamer identities is my desire for this research. Understanding provides knowledge and has its origin in Aristotle's tradition (Tuomela, 1976), which states that a goal-oriented explanation of human behaviour can be achieved by finding plausible reasons for this behaviour. Such reasons for the behaviour, often 'dictated' by the environment, are the foundation and a starting point for an interpretation of behaviour.

Verstehen (German word for understanding), developed by Weber (1949), a German sociologist with significant influence on sociological theory, explains an approach that helps understanding the reasons for human actions. Also historians like Collingwood (1946) and Dilthey (1977) used this principle to explain human behaviour, but extended it by the desire to correctly place human behaviours in its historical context and to conclude its consequences. In this matter, Dilthey (Schmidt, 2006, p. 29) distinguished between two different kinds of knowledge: *Verstehen* (*understanding*) and *Erklären* (*explaining*). Furthermore, he also pointed out the difference between natural sciences (Naturwissenschaft) and social sciences (Geisteswissenschaft), which is also referred to as 'sciences of man' (Dilthey, Makkreel, & Rodi, 1989, p. 10). The latter, the "Wissenschaften vom handelnden Menschen"

(Dilthey et al., 1989, p. 10), the sciences of human behaviour, is the playground for the *Verstehen* principle, based on its aim to gain a deep 'inner experience', a comprehensive understanding. Dilthey states, "only what the mind has produced, the mind can fully understand" (Martin, 2000, p. 10; Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977, p. 4) and thereby confirms the use of *Verstehen*.

Von Wright (1971) extended existing principles of understanding, which include beliefs, goals and intentions of the person or the group of people in focus, to allow more accurate interpretation. Interpretation, also known as hermeneutics, is closely associated with *Verstehen* and provides understanding of human behaviour in specific situations. Hermeneutics "concerns theories for correctly interpreting texts" (Schmidt, 2006, p. 1) and examples can be found in historic texts that were analysed with regard to the specific setting and the social and environmental context in mind. One such text is the bible, for instance.

By moving the general idea of human behaviour in a specific situation away from historic texts and by placing it in a wider context, being observation and interpretation of contemporary events and situations, a broader understanding can be achieved (May, 2009).

Proponents (...) share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. This goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor's definition of a situation, for *verstehen*. (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118)

Schwandt (1994, p. 118) usefully offers a discussion of the concept of 'emic' in relation to the 'life world'. The term 'emic' was first introduced by the linguist Pike (1954) and, like many others, it has its origins in the Greek language. Emic is derived from the word 'phonemic', which stands for the authentic use of sounds (articulation) in specific languages. In regard to human behaviour, one can say that the emic approach provides authentic data by using an insider, a member of the culture being studied. Dialogue with that person, or a group of people of that culture, unveils trustworthy data and "bridge[s] the gap between idea and thing, between speech and experience" (Headland, Pike, &

Harris, 1990, p. 34). In this context, the 'thing' stands for the knowledge of action and behaviour, and the 'gap' that has to be bridged is *Verstehen*. So, once that missing link is identified and understood, one could compare it to the outsider's view, also known as 'etics', and enrich or correct it with knowledge gained from the insider perspective. The result of bringing emics and etics together can generate new questions, new gaps, that can be bridged by applying the emics approach again. This procedure, the going back and forth between emic and etic, is known as the *hermeneutic circle*.

The hermeneutic circle states that one cannot understand the whole until one has understood the parts, but that one cannot understand the parts until one has understood the whole. (Schmidt, 2006, p. 15)

The common goal of emics and etics, and of the *hermeneutic circle* also, is the construction of meaning and thereby generation of *Verstehen*. The 'outsider' mainly collects 'raw data' by observing participants, members of the culture of interest. There is no certainty that the data and the meaning given to it by the observer are correct. Therefore, the 'insider', a member of the culture of interest, can confirm or correct, and also explain the data so that it provides a complete picture and hence leads to understanding. Interviews and discussions play an important role in the meaning-generation-process.

4.2. Examination of my method

As mentioned before, this qualitative research is conducted in the interpretive paradigm and it allows the study of "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). It has been my desire to get a better understanding of gamer identity in an online world, and the qualitative research within the interpretative paradigm facilitates it and was therefore chosen. In this interpretive study, drawing on a small sample, I will not be able to generalize an entire population or generate common rules. Instead, a group of people, gamers of a single guild in the game *World of Warcraft*, are the centre of attention. By limiting the number of participants, it is anticipated to

get a deep and rich description of behaviour, which can then be interpreted and finally provides the goal of this research: *Verstehen*, the German word for understanding. Outwaite (1975, chapter 3) understands Dilthey's writing as a need to situate human behaviour in its context in order to allow *Verstehen*. Besides the requirement of context-inclusiveness, it is anticipated to gain *Verstehen* by applying the emic approach and by incorporating it in the *hermeneutic circle*.

I will construct this case study objectively and gather true data by observing participants in their 'native environment', in the culture of interest for this study: during raids with fellow guild members in the world of Azeroth. Observation will include behaviour in form of actions being performed and words being said, and the proportion of words to actions. I may be able to recognize patterns and special cases that require further research. Gathered data will then be analysed and interpreted in context, using a simplified form of adapting grounded theory method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 507 - 531).

Once the etic process of data gathering is completed, participants, namely members of a guild in *WoW*, are used to get an insiders' view, a deep understanding of human behaviour (Philipchalk & McConnell, 1994) of the culture being studied. At first, gamers will be interviewed in a semi-structured form that gives freedom to the interviewee to extend certain answers and to include topics that were not originally included in the question catalogue on one hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 701 - 702). On the other, the interviewer can modify the flow of questions according to the interviewee's replies. In addition to such, interesting and important topics, either mentioned by the insider or observed during the etic part of this study, can be included in the interview and focus can be given to them. This procedure also allows gathering of more relevant data. Once all interviews are completed, all gained information will then be analysed and 'raw data' gathered from observation will contribute to *Verstehen* of gamer identity in *World of Warcraft*. Understanding smaller aspects of the picture makes you understand the whole, but the whole picture can only be understood if one understands all separate elements. This procedure, called the *hermeneutic circle* will be

helpful to make meaning of the gathered data and to understand the whole area of interest (Schmidt, 2006, p. 15).

4.3. Application of my method

Technological progress has given Internet users the freedom of accessing world data without leaving their homes and various communication channels provide options for socializing online. The current state of technology enabled me to conduct this research about gamer identities.

4.3.1. Recruitment of participants

Guilds in *World of Warcraft* have about 40 to 50 active members with about 100 avatars⁸ in total. The observational part of the project therefore focused on raid members and their main avatars. From a total of about 50 gamers, only 25 are allowed to raid at any time. For this reason, potential participants were selected off the raid pool to guarantee gathering of substantial and adequate data that will facilitate *Verstehen* of gamer identity in the game *World of Warcraft*.

I went online, entering the world of Azeroth with a self-created avatar, looking for a guild that fulfils specific criteria. First of all, the guild of interest has to play high-end content, which means that gamers are experienced, skilled and have their avatars well equipped. Secondly, the guild has to have more than 25 members that are required for raids and boss fights. Also, it is desired to find a serious guild that raids about three to four times a week for about four hours per raid-day on average, and that is progress-oriented. Among others, the guild *Schwarzer Lotus* fulfilled those pre-selection criteria and was contacted via a post in the forum on their website. The guild *Schwarzer Lotus* and all of its members had been curious about the study from the beginning, fulfilled all set criteria and were therefore chosen to be the sample of the

⁸ Total of main and secondary avatars (twinks) of all guild members participating in raids

whole population of gamers playing *World of Warcraft*. Observation of the guild members' gameplay, as I mentioned before, is the etic approach and provides 'raw data'. In addition to observation, interviews with selected guild members extend the etic approach and will provide an insider's perspective that allows collection of rich data that contributes to the knowledge generation process. A return to the etic approach will be used to confirm provided data in interviews and to close gaps and open new doors. When such a door, possibly questions, an uncertainty or an additional, interesting, and for this work relevant aspect is opened, a return to the emic approach is possible. This back and forth movement in search of important and rich data, provided by insiders, that contributes to the generation of knowledge and that facilitates *Verstehen* is the application of the *hermeneutic circle*.

My request to observe the guild's gameplay during three raids was granted and dates were agreed on quickly. Also, potential gamers fulfilling specific selection criteria (interest in contributing to the research, being an adult of twenty years and above, being an 'established' and experienced gamer who has been playing *WoW* for a minimum of two years, with a minimum membership of three months in the guild *Schwarzer Lotus*, and who regularly participates in raids with fellow gamers of that guild) were asked to volunteer to be the focus of observation. Four enthusiastic gamers were recruited within a few days after I had sent my request and they also agreed to be available for interviews at a time that suits their schedule best.

4.3.2. Observation

Originally, I had planned to be in the game with my own avatar, observing all action on my own screen. By doing so, I would have taken over a guild members' place in the raid group, but would have not been of any help for the guild during the raid. Therefore, it was decided that I would travel to a guild and raid group member living relatively close-by and conduct observation from there, using monitor synchronization. By doing so, I am still able to properly observe the gameplay on my own screen, but will not be harmful to

the guild. I do not want to interfere, but observe ordinary raids. All communication was listened to on the guilds' *TeamSpeak* session by using a separate headset.

Raids are the most beneficial time for a guild's activity observation and were therefore selected. Guild members' behaviour will be observed in accordance to two channels: (1) communication (given instructions) and (2) behaviour (team play).

A raid has the following communication structure: The first stage is 'trash talk', a conversation before the boss fight starts that includes sharing of general, sometimes even non-game-related information. Trash talk is followed by the 'pre-boss talk', a conversation right before the fight, where boss-specific details and strategies are shared and discussed. Battles also engender 'boss talk', which is a group- and fight-specific conversation concerning allocation of roles and positioning. Lastly, no matter whether the outcome of the battle, conversations always take place after the fight. If the fight was a success, then the conversation is about loot⁹ allocation. In case of a loss, then mistakes are discussed and reasons for losing the fight are investigated.

Raids are packed with action and communication. Originally, I had planned to spend about twelve hours, which equals to three raid days, observing raids of the guild *Schwarzer Lotus*. However, only two days of observation, which equals to eight hours, gave me substantial and comprehensive data and allowed me to identify patterns and structures that were implemented in the semi-structured interview questions.

4.3.3. *Semi-structured interviews*

Gamers who were chosen for interviews were asked for about an hour of their spare time at a day and a time that suits them best within a timeframe of two weeks. Due to the guild's raid schedule and members' *real* life commitments, and due to logistic difficulties, all interviews took place online, either before

⁹ Items the boss dropped and that are beneficial for gamers

raids started or after they were completed by using the program *Skype* that makes peer-to-peer phone calls using Voice-over-IP conversations possible. None of the gamers had to buy additional equipment or encountered inconveniences because headset and microphone that are required to have a VoIP conversation are used to communicate during raids in *WoW*. Also, the program *Skype* is very popular and free of charge and therefore all gamers had it installed on their computers.

Information sheets were sent to all participants prior to the interview. Two gamers out of the pool of four were online at the agreed time and date the interview was supposed to take place. Another gamer postponed the interview because her children got ill, but another time was agreed on quickly and data could be collected without any problem. Only the fourth gamer did not come online for the interview and also did not contact me to cancel the interview, even though he had my contact details. I waited for the approximate length of the scheduled interview (60 minutes) online, but he did not show up. The following day, I went online at the same time because I thought the gamer might have gotten confused with the dates, but he stayed away. Therefore, I contacted another potential participant if he would mind joining the study as a replacement for the other gamer. He agreed and even had time immediately. Hence, the interview took place without need of finding a suitable time.

Before the interview started, interviewees were asked if there are any questions regarding information provided on the participant information sheet. If so, uncertainties were discussed and privacy regulations were explained. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, which enabled me to interact with participants in a 'normal' and informal way that made them feel like being involved in a talk, rather than an interview. Also, thanks to the structure of this type of interviews, questions could be arranged in accordance to the gamers' replies. Participants have always had the freedom to ask questions or even stop the interview at any time. I am open-minded and have been curious in knowledge participants are willing to share. I listened carefully, never tried to manipulate participants' answers and interviewees have never been limited in their behaviour. There was even the option for interviews to

get postponed or even cancelled, if desired. I enjoyed conducting interviews because they allowed interesting insights in gamers' intentions and expectations of time spent playing *World of Warcraft*. Also, insiders of the culture being studied provided rich and valuable data for this research about effects of online gaming on gamer identities.

4.3.4. *Theme identification*

Once the data collection was completed, I listened to all recorded interviews and developed a coding sheet that makes importance given to specific aspects visible and it was therefore the foundation for further analysis (Please see appendix three on pages 101 - 102). Then, I transcribed all interviews because the textualisation of interviews made it easier for me to work with the material. I made use of different colours and symbols to highlight repetition, recurrence and passion and to make the data more visual, following Karl Marx's view of books: "They are my slaves and they must serve me" (Lafargue, 2003). Thereby gained information was carefully reviewed and possible themes were identified in every single transcription. Then, potential themes found in all four interviews were used to rearrange information provided by interviewed gamers and visualize it, including time indicators as reference, in charts (one per gamer). Once that procedure was done for all interviewees, I marked and numbered every sheet carefully, cut them apart and reassembled them precisely category-by-category. This rigorous analysis of data gathered from interviews and observation, combined with its rearrangement made comparison of gamers' replies easier and also allowed me to reduce the number of potential themes and to identify five main patterns being community, personal dilemma, avatar-relationships, personal satisfaction and entertainment. Also, this method allowed me to sort all themes according to their given importance and present them in chapter five accordingly.

The applied procedure supports creativity and made arrangement, presentation and discussion of gathered data easier. All themes identified are

strongly defensible and every researcher using my gathered data and following my described algorithm will understand and support my choice of themes.

4.3.5. *Final steps*

Following the data gathering and the theme identification, and in preparation for a discussion of the data in the last chapter, I analysed and presented my findings in chapter five.

The last chapter enabled me to bring all insights, provided by gamers of the game *World of Warcraft*, my own observation and analysis of gathered data together, and to discuss it meticulously.

As a result, I was capable to answer my research question: 'In what ways does online gaming affect gamer identity?' However, instead of presenting my answer of the research question at the end of the chapter, I decided to use it to frame a grounded theory of gamer identity and presented both, together in one section, at the beginning of chapter six.

Grounded theory is not only a product of research, but it equally is a specific style of analysis. It helped me to stay focused and it also supported my knowledge gathering and theory development by admitting a "simultaneous data collection and analysis, with each informing and focusing the other throughout the research process" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 508). The starting point was a literature review, a gathering of pre-existing knowledge and data from research-relevant areas and concepts that are likely to be recognized during interviewing. Gamers of the game *World of Warcraft* were chosen to provide detailed information in interviews that either covered the concepts presented in the already reviewed literature, or that opened new doors and made me search for more literature. In return, identified concepts and gathered data enabled me to analyse, interpret, understand and comprehensively present my findings in regard to gamer identities in an online world.

Chapter 5

- Data -

Interviews with gamers of *World of Warcraft*'s guild *Schwarzer Lotus* provided most data presented in this chapter. However, aspects and results drawn from observation contributed to this chapter and to *Verstehen* of gamer identity in general.

In the previous chapter, I explained my methodology and the methods used, and named the themes for this research. I also outlined how they were identified. Now, in Chapter five, I will present my analysis of all data gathered by using the recognized themes. The order of presentation of those themes is not random, but according to the importance given to them by the research participants.

5.1. Community

Community. What does it stand for? What does it include? What is excluded? Well, Community, in the context of *World of Warcraft*, has different meanings. First of all, it is a group of gamers sharing a common interest and playing the same game: *WoW*. Secondly, it is the communication that takes place in the game, no matter whether it is game or non-game related, and no matter what channel of communication is used. Thirdly, community stands for friendships, relationships and bonds between gamers in this *virtual* environment. And lastly, community also refers to experiences, achievements and encounters.

Gamer two refers to *World of Warcraft* as being fully based and build on community¹⁰. She even sees community as the reason for gamers to go online and to return to *WoW* regularly¹¹. Gamer one supports gamer two's

¹⁰ 'Das Spiel besteht eigentlich nur aus Community' [13:57]

¹¹ 'Das ist glaub ich der Grund warum alle ON kommen' [13:57]

view, saying that social interaction is one of the most important aspects of the game¹². Gamers have to meet other (like-minded) gamers, find out their skills and use them for personal, as well as for the group's advantage (success) so that they become a team over time¹³. Only that way you can be successful in *World of Warcraft*, as outlined by gamer four¹⁴.

A side-effect of being a member of a guild is that online friendships can extend to *real* life friendships because gamers spend a lot of time together online, talk with each other using *TeamSpeak*, and even organize guild meetings (at least once a year), where people behind *virtual* characters meet in *real* life¹⁵. Gamer one also added that guilds reduce communication barriers that are in place in *real* life because the game *World of Warcraft* is played by people with the same interest and they therefore have common topics to talk about¹⁶. The lack of face-to-face communication makes it easier for people who are not that talkative in *real* life¹⁷.

Gamer two highlighted the fact that community is very extended in guilds and even private details like phone numbers, for instance, are known by guild members in order to stay in touch outside *WoW*, in *real* life, as well¹⁸. The topic of anonymity was mentioned by gamer one by saying that gamers

¹² 'Ist auf jeden Fall einer der wichtigsten Faktoren im ganzen Spiel' [25:47]

¹³ 'Man muss sich kennen lernen, man muss die Leute kennen, mit denen man spielt, man muss sich aufeinander einspielen. Es ist einfach wichtig, dass man länger mit den Leuten zusammen spielt; und zwangsläufig lernt man die Leute dadurch dann besser kennen, sitzt viel im 'TS' zusammen, auch außerhalb vom Spiel, redet nicht nur übers Spiel, sondern über andere Sachen. Das passiert irgendwie nebenher und ist auf jeden Fall einer der wichtigsten Teile von WoW, finde ich' [25:47]

¹⁴ 'Community ist schon wichtig, um was zu erreichen' [21:43]

¹⁵ 'Man lernt super gut Leute kennen. Also ich hab auch etliche Leute im 'RL' kennen gelernt, über WoW. Wir haben da viel gemacht, also Gildentreffen und so. Also ich hab richtig gute Kumpels kennen gelernt mittlerweile, also die mittlerweile richtig gute Kumpels von mir sind, die ich nur über Wow kennen gelernt hab' [24:39]

¹⁶ 'Durch das Spiel wird ja ne Barriere gesprengt. Das heißt wir treffen uns da, haben alle die selben Interessen, wir verfolgen alle mehr oder weniger das selbe Ziel [...] und somit haben wir eine gemeinsame Basis, von der wir ausgehen können. Da ist es oftmals so, dass, aufgrund der Eliminierung der Barriere, manchmal mehr und einfacher kommuniziert wird als im wahren Leben [...] Ich denke auch, dass viele Leute, die in Wirklichkeit net so kommunikativ sind, das im Spiel einfacher haben, da einfach gleiche Interessen da sind' [01:05:56]

¹⁷ 'Für viele [Computerspieler] wird es auch der Vorteil sein, dass man den Leuten nicht ins Gesicht gucken muss' [01:05:56]

¹⁸ 'Weil Du sagst, da klingelt bei Dir das Telefon und Dich rufen Leute an. Heißt das, dass die Community in der Gilde so gut ist, dass man sich so vertraut, dass man dann private Daten wie Telefonnummern raus gibt?' [33:19]; 'Ja' [33:22]

decide the extent of anonymity entirely for themselves¹⁰. It all depends on their willingness to share details in *TeamSpeak* or via different channels of communication, nobody forces them and there are no rules and regulations about how much of gamers' private lives and *real* identities has to be unveiled¹⁹. In addition to this, it was also interesting to hear from gamer two that information provided during talks within the guild matches *real* life situations²⁰.

Gamer three said that he always felt welcome and got very well along with fellow guild members, even when totally new to a guild²¹. All four gamers have been members of several guilds and therefore had to get used to new gamers eventually. For gamer four, the lack of community was the reason for him to change guilds²², which highlights again the importance of this feature of the game and its culture. Sometimes, guilds broke apart (as mentioned by gamer one²³ and gamer four²⁴) and gamers had to look for a new group of people to be successful with. In contrast to gamers one and four, gamer three was forced to join a new guild because he got excluded from his old guild for rumours about his lack of loyalty to the guild²⁵. Gamer two chose her new guild according to special criteria: she made sure that her new guild raids only three days per week, clears game content, is highly motivated and has a decent ranking (*WoW* progress)²⁶. Gamer four mentioned an interesting aspect regarding the guild and his personal goals: he would stay in a guild

¹⁹ 'Meistens weißt Du den Vornamen und die Stadt in der sie wohnen, aber ich weiß eigentlich fast von keinem, also die ich hinterher nicht persönlich kennen gelernt habe, weiß ich eigentlich von Niemandem den Nachnamen und die Adresse, oder so was. Im Endeffekt ist es doch noch Anonym. Im größten Sinne' [01:06:22]

²⁰ 'Wenn's dann zu nem Gildentreffen kommt, sind dann die zuvor gewonnenen Informationen [...] dann deckungsgleich mit dem, was man dann sieht, und was man erlebt in der Zeit?' [41:34] ; 'Ja, doch' [41:36]

²¹ 'Ich hab mich sofort eingelebt dort. War supi' [09:55]

²² 'Die Community in der Gilde war halt nicht so wirklich gut' [21:07]

²³ 'Die Gilde hat sich dann immer wieder.... haben wir Fusioniert, und es ist dann nichts geworden... wieder aufgelöst, wieder bei null angefangen' [16:57]

²⁴ 'Die erste Gilde hat sich aufgelöst. Die zweite Gilde hat sich auch aufgelöst. Die dritte Gilde hat sich auch aufgelöst' [20:18]

²⁵ 'Gerüchte verbreiten über Bewerbung bei anderer Gilde und somit Kick. Also Gerüchte' [07:28]

²⁶ 'Content', 'WoW Progress', und die Motivation der Gilde, auch noch wirklich den Lich King im Hard Mode zu legen. Das war mir wichtig, dass ich eine Gilde finde, die nicht vier mal die Woche raidet, sondern wirklich nur drei Mal, und trotzdem noch ganz akribisch dabei ist den Lich King zu legen und im 'Progress' auf dem Server noch sehr weit vorne mit ist' [19:42]

with bad community if that guild is especially successful²⁷. Even in the current guild, his personal goals don't match the guild's goals completely²⁸.

Gamer one, being an experienced guild founder, outlined that only gamers who perform well and play long hours are allowed to be in a guild²⁹. Gamer two seconded that statement²¹. She said success and ability to perfectly play the avatar are recruiting criteria of guilds³⁰. Gamer three pointed out advantages of being a guild member: guild life, playing the game together, community itself, getting to know people better over time³¹ and talking about out-of-game content when not busy with raids are the most important for him³². Gamer one mentioned communication and feedback regarding in-game performance as another advantage of *WoW*³³. Disadvantages only exist for gamers three and four. They both pointed out the game's time intensity and the fact that one had to be there at specific times³⁴. However, all gamers mentioned time dedication repeatedly, even without calling it a disadvantage of the game.

Gamer two mentioned that blaming fellow guild members for not performing well is normal in every progress guild in *World of Warcraft*³⁵. In addition, gamer one said that gamers are criticized ('flaming') for bad gameplay when the guild fails to kill a boss, but one has to get used to it because it will

²⁷ 'Wenn ich jetzt noch irgendwie in ner guten Raid-Gilde wär, die zwar ne beschissene Community hätte, dann würd ich aber trotzdem weiter spielen, weil ich ja noch den Erfolg haben kann' [22:00]

²⁸ 'Na, ich bin halt mehr orientiert, Erfolge zu machen. Also es gibt ja auch die Erfolge im Spiel. Und die Meisten sind halt mehr daran orientiert, die Bosse im Hard-Mode umzuhauen. Halt mehr die schweren Bosse zu töten und nicht alle Erfolge zu machen' [23:57]

²⁹ 'Leute, wenn Ihr die Aktivität net bringt, dann müsst Ihr gehen' [21:20]

³⁰ 'Das ist ja auch ein riesen Auswahlkriterium, dass Du also ein Spieler bist, der Seinen Char gut beherrscht, der ganz ganz viel Schaden macht, und keine Fehler' [29:45]

³¹ 'Vorteil ist halt das ganze Gildenleben, das ganze Zocken zusammen, die ganze Community an sich. Weil dadurch lernt man ja auch die Menschen besser kennen' [10:50]

³² 'Während der Raids ist man spezifisch auf die Bosse usw. fixiert, aber wenn das nicht ist, dann labert man über jeden Scheiß' [11:06]

³³ 'Ne, äh so ab drei derben Fails ist so normal, aber ich geb, ich den Leuten schon manchmal vier oder fünf Chancen gegeben. Also ich hab eigentlich dann immer gesagt, ich hab's immer versucht so vernünftig wie möglich zu klären' [57:13]

³⁴ 'Man ist zeitlich sehr gebunden' [gamer three 10:29] ; 'Nachteile sind halt, dass man halt, wenn man sich für Raids anmeldet und so, dass man zu bestimmten Zeiten online sein muss, und nicht online sein kann, wenn man jetzt lustig ist' [22:30]

³⁵ 'In jeder Progress-Gilde, die ganz vorne mitspielt' [29:45]

happen regularly, and it is also seen as an encouragement for better performance next time³⁶.

5.2. Personal dilemma

While it is true that playing *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) not only provides fun and an enjoyable free time activity, but interviews have unveiled an unintended outcome of playing the game. In fact, this *virtual reality* causes drawbacks and consequences in *real* life. The gamers' lives, their *real* world, is being affected by the game, without the game actively reaching over, doing harm to the gamer by reaching out through the screen. *World of Warcraft* does not only take people's time over, but in a way even their whole lives. Families, friendships and especially personal lives including relationships, work history and diversity of leisure activities are affected.

In this context, every single participant answered questions regarding consequences of *WoW* in RL, although the complexity of this question's reply was very different for every *WoW* enthusiast. Gamer one called himself 'hardcore gamer'³⁷ and talked about massive consequences. He admitted investing enormous amounts of time and reducing time available for other free time activities³⁸. He called it a 'typical nerd syndrome'³⁹. Gamer four acted in a very similar way. During the interview he referred to addiction while speaking

³⁶ 'Es wird auch in der Gilde geflamed. [...] Wenn ich Scheiße bau, und irgendwas versau was wichtig war, oder wenn ich wirklich den Kill-Try versau [...] dann ist ganz klar, dass die anderen einfach sauer sind und Dich erst mal flamen deswegen' [54:15]

³⁷ 'Damit das gemeinsame Ziel erreicht wird [...] brauchst Du Hardcore-Zocker. Natürlich gibt es Leute [...] die noch mal ne ganze ganze Ecke kranker sind. Aber ich würd schon sagen [ich bin ein Hardcore-Zocker]. JA, auf jeden Fall' [20:09 – 20:32]

³⁸ 'Ne, also da gab's auf jeden Fall ganz drastische Auswirkungen. Also, ähm (kurze Pause), ich hab viel viel mehr gespielt als davor. Das ist aber auch halt dieses Spiel, es läuft anders halt als andere Spiele. Das kannst Du halt nicht einfach aus machen, sondern Du spielst halt mit anderen zusammen. Ich hab auf jeden Fall viel viel mehr Zeit investiert. Es ging dann auch sehr schnell in die Richtung, dass die Leute gesagt haben: 'Also der (Name entfernt), der spielt die ganze Zeit nur noch', was natürlich auch gestimmt hat. Und ja, ich muss auch sagen, ich hab dann zu den aktiven Zeiten, wo ich so richtig viel geraided hab, hab ich auch einfach viele andere Sachen, die ich gemacht habe, eingeschränkt. Also ich bin am Wochenende nicht mehr weg gegangen, ähm ja, weil ich lieber gespielt hab halt also' [07:55]

³⁹ 'Das ist das ganz klassische Nerd-Syndrom' [07:55]

about his gaming behaviour in the past⁴⁰. He also highlighted that he did not realize how much time he had spent playing *World of Warcraft*⁴¹. Gamer two, the only female participant, called herself 'addicted' because of the massive amount of time she spends online⁴²: she talked about 'addiction' when saying that there is an urge for her to go online and talk to friends in *WoW*⁴³. She is afraid of losing out on a conversation and updates from friends she made in the game⁴⁴. Originally, gamer two had started playing the game as a way to spend time with her husband, even though they followed different goals in the game⁴⁴. She started *World of Warcraft* in September 2008 and had spent 201 full days in the game until the day the interview took place (August 08, 2010)⁴⁵. People who do not play *WoW* therefore criticized her and even called her 'addicted'⁴⁶. Gamer one addressed the same aspect⁴⁷. In her (gamer two) defence, she pointed out that she often stands at one specific location in Dalaran⁴⁸ being *afk*⁴⁹ most of the time she's logged in. Also, her family comes first and she pauses playing the game anytime her children need her⁵⁰. Gamer three's reply to the question regarding time spent in *WoW* was that he

⁴⁰ 'Und damals hab ich das Ganze mehr [...] ernst genommen [...] So'n Bisschen suchtmäßig' [09:58]

⁴¹ 'Da ist die Zeit ziemlich im Flug vergangen' [17:59]

⁴² 'Das ist halt dann dieses Suchtverhalten. Es sind Leute im Spiel, die man gerne mag, mit denen man sich täglich eigentlich unterhält. Ob's jetzt im 'Whisper' ist, oder übers 'Mumble', oder TS, oder was auch immer, und man einfach.... Das ist halt dieses Suchtverhalten' [12:27]

⁴³ 'Das ist halt dieses Suchtverhalten: Du kommst online, loggst Dich ein [...] man unterhält sich nett. Dann geht man wieder weg, und [...] du verpasst halt nichts. Bescheuert, aber' [12:27]

⁴⁴ 'Einfach mehr so, dass jeder sein Privatleben hat, aber dennoch, dass man zusammen sitzt' [16:46]

⁴⁵ 'Also ich spiel seit September 2008 und habe eine Spielzeit von 201 Tagen' [11:34]

⁴⁶ 'Leute, die nicht spielen, die tolerieren das, sagen aber auch klar 'Du bist süchtig und verbringst zu viel Zeit in diesem Spiel' [40:30]

⁴⁷ 'Boa, der ist ja gar nicht mehr ansprechbar! Der ist voll in dem Spiel drin' [...] dadurch schnell Vorurteile aufkommen wie 'addicted' und sonst was' [51:53]

⁴⁸ Dalaran is the name of a town in the world of Azeroth

⁴⁹ *afk* = away from keyboard ; 'Wobei ich sagen muss, dass ich 70% dieser Zeit *afk* in 'Dalaran' auf der Mauer stehe, und gar nicht am Rechner bin' [11:49]

⁵⁰ 'Wenn eins meiner Kinder krank ist, oder, ähm, wenn Irgendjemand wach wird und weint, dann steh ich auf, also das ist ganz klar. Da geht meine Familie und meine Kinder.... Da stellt sich gar nicht die Frage. [05:08]

only plays 'a bit of *WoW*', being four to five hours daily⁵¹. Gamer four mentioned this time frame as well⁵².

Drastic effects on in-class school performance⁵³ were outlined by gamer four as a consequence of playing *World of Warcraft*. Gamer one did not even finish high school⁵⁴ and was without a permanent job⁵⁵ at the time the interview was taken. In addition, gaming led to isolation⁵⁶ and health problems for gamer four in *real* life because he ate less, and sometimes even totally forgot to eat because he had been too busy in the game⁵⁷. It should be mentioned that three out of four gamers interviewed are still single. The fourth gamer is divorced.

Gamer one mentioned an interesting point: he said his personal awareness and attitude towards time spent with gaming changed while playing *World of Warcraft*. Meeting people who play the same style, or spend even more hours in this *virtual* world than he did made him change⁵⁸. The game was taken very seriously by gamer four when he started playing *WoW*⁵⁹ and he invested much time in this *virtual* world⁶⁰. Other gamers, like gamer three for instance, think they never played *World of Warcraft* too much or for too long⁶¹. Gamer one even goes a step further and says whoever wants to play high end

⁵¹ 'Ich hab ein Bisschen WoW gezockt [...] nur vier, fünf Stunden online gewesen am Tag WoW gezockt' [22:47]

⁵² 'Mit'm Raid so 4-5 Stunden' [06:03]

⁵³ 'Die schulischen Leistungen' [27:35]

⁵⁴ 'Äh, ich hab nen Realschulabschluss gemacht, und war danach noch zwei Jahre aufm informationstechnischen Gymnasium. Das hab ich aber net fertig gemacht' [02:43] ;

⁵⁵ 'Im Moment bin ich PAP-Programmierer, selbstständig. Und zwar ohne Ausbildung im Moment noch' [03:03]

⁵⁶ 'Ich hab mich auch nicht mehr so viel oft mit Freunden getroffen' [27:45]

⁵⁷ 'Ich saß halt mehr vorm PC und so'n Scheiß. Hab weniger gegessen' [04:52] ; 'Ich hab jetzt nen Raid, da hab ich jetzt keine Zeit, da kann ich ja nachher noch essen, und blä, und dann hab ich dann doch nicht gemacht' [05:18]

⁵⁸ 'Allerdings normale Verhältnisse ändert sich dann ganz ganz schnell. Weil dadurch dass man, wenn man viel spielt, lernt man andere Leute kennen, die viel spielen, und dann sieht man das dann halt im Vergleich zu den Leuten. Und wenn dann halt welche sind, die mehr spielen, dann sagt man wieder 'ach so viel spiele ich eigentlich gar nicht'. Es gibt halt immer jemanden, der mehr spielt, und daran spielt man dann selber ganz schnell runter, wie viel man selber eigentlich spielt' [09:40]

⁵⁹ 'Das hab ich schon ernster genommen damals mit dem Leveln und mit dem Raiden und so. Weiß nicht, hab das alles irgendwie erster genommen. Aber ich hab das halt nicht wirklich als Spiel empfunden' [09:32]

⁶⁰ 'Die Zeit [ist] ziemlich im Flug vergangen' [17:59] ; 'Ungefähr die letzten... 5 1/2 Jahre' [27:00]

⁶¹ 'War immer ausgeglichen. Ich fand's immer gut. Andere sagen zwar es ist zu viel, aber ich fand's gut' [37:40]

content and wants to be successful has to invest a lot of time in order to achieve success⁶². Gamer two said during the interview that she had cut her in-game time once in order to get her *real* life sorted⁶³. However, even after compensating a lot for *WoW*⁶⁴ and after having talked about a family member whose life got totally out of control because of being addicted to *World of Warcraft*⁶⁵, gamer two said that the game has no negative consequences for her *real* life⁶⁶.

Only gamer two mentioned that some of her RL skills (multi-tasking) were useful in *WoW* and helped her to perform when in charge of a team leader position⁶⁷. Gamer one said he is well organised and on time in *WoW*⁶⁸. Also, he has learned how to lead a small enterprise and how to talk to people in various situations due to his leading role in the guild⁶⁹.

In addition to drawbacks all four gamers referred to, gamer one outlined an additional one: whenever a new *AddOn*⁷⁰ is released by Blizzard

⁶² 'Wir wollen End-Game-Raiden [und] dann ist es absolut notwendig, dass man so viel Zeit investiert' [23:54]

⁶³ 'Ich [hatte] einfach überhaupt keine Zeit mehr, und [habe] für mich entschieden, ich muss jetzt erst einmal ein Bisschen zurecht kommen, meinen Umzug planen, und mein Leben mal ordnen' [11:07]

⁶⁴ 'Was hast Du gemacht, als Du noch kein *WoW* gespielt hast? Das stimmt wohl. Ich lese viel viel weniger, hab unheimlich viel gelesen vorher. Oder mal nen Film geschaut, oder ne DVD. Also das gar nicht mehr. Mal ganz selten' [51:45]

⁶⁵ 'Naja, das liegt aber eher daran dass mein Bruder ganz exzessiv gespielt hat, und dadurch sein Leben ordentlich aus den Fugen geraten ist: Weil er also weder Wohnung, noch Arbeit, noch Haushalt gemacht hat, ähm, vergessen hat zu essen' [46:56]

⁶⁶ 'Uhm..... Nicht wirklich. Ich habe immer alles gut unter einen Hut gekriegt und immer nur dann gespielt, wenn ich Zeit hatte' [51:09]

⁶⁷ 'Das ich das aus dem Privaten mit ins Spiel übertragen kann' [09:58]

⁶⁸ 'Ich bin immer überpünktlich gewesen im Spiel, ich war immer pünktlich gewesen zu den Raids, immer präzise abgemeldet, immer gesagt, was ist. Und da immer sehr akkurat gewesen, was ich in Wirklichkeit eigentlich gar net bin. In Wirklichkeit bin ich eher total unpünktlich und durcheinander. Auch hier jetzt mein Zimmer ist immer ziemlich unaufgeräumt. Mein Inventar hingegen war immer picko-bello sortiert. Also eigentlich ist mein Charakter ganz anders als ich, viel besser' [01:00:30]

⁶⁹ 'Was ich übernommen hab, aber was im RL jetzt noch nicht so viel praktische Anwendung gefunden hat, ist einfach dass, ich finde ich hab ziemlich gut gelernt, wie man so kleinere Unternehmen, was ja ne Gilde im Endeffekt ist, wie man die so'n bisschen führt und ich denk ich hab ziemlich viel Feingefühl entwickelt, wie man mit Leuten reden muss. Wie man, wenn man organisatorisch so was aufzieht, mit was man rechnen muss, was passiert, was alles dazwischen kommen kann, was alles schief geht. Wie Leute sich halt verhalten in so ner Gruppe. Da hab ich relativ viel gelernt' [01:03:27]

⁷⁰ *AddOn* = expansion pack for the game, an extension of the game's software that adds new features to the game, like new races for instance.

Entertainment, all achieved progress is reset and every gamer starts from scratch⁷¹, which can be very discouraging for 'old' gamers⁷².

Also, every gamer admitted that success and failure in the game affected the personal moods in *real* life. Being a guild founder made gamer one feel a role model and he therefore acted accordingly; even though that is completely different to the way he is in *real* life⁷³.

Two gamers (two and four) said clearly that they should have never started playing the game – it has taken too much of their lives over⁷⁴. However, only gamer four actively regrets the time spent online. He changed his attitude and gaming behaviour because he realized that he had himself well isolated and he was not happy with that situation, and therefore wanted a change⁷⁵. Gamer one did not mention anything regarding that matter and gamer three pointed out that he would have most likely played another game to the same extent if he would not have started with *WoW*⁷⁶. Games are his passion⁷⁷ and therefore he also gives high importance to them⁷⁸.

As a last comment: all gamers insisted that they are quite well aware of what is going on around them in *real* life, except for when they are busy in boss fights, that take about five to fifteen minutes each⁷⁹. Even though boss fights are very important, gamer two still gives first priority to her family, more precisely to her children, and would leave the game any time; even during raids, if her children need her⁸⁰.

⁷¹ 'Das war bisher jedes AddOn so, dass man mehr oder weniger 'resetted' wurde' [14:52]

⁷² 'Wenn das AddOn raus kommt, dass alles, was man gemacht hat, fürn Arsch, und man fängt praktisch von vorne an. Und das hat mir einfach ziemlich viel Motivation genommen' [14:00]

⁷³ 'Ich war in ner führenden Position in der Gilde, ich musste Vorbild sein. Also war's einfach meine Pflicht, dass ich fünf oder 10 Minuten vorm Raid einfach schon da bin' [01:01:55]

⁷⁴ 'Ich glaube ich hätte nie mit Wow angefangen. Daran bin ich selber Schuld' [52:25] ; 'Ich hätte viel mehr machen können, hätte ich mit diesem Spiel nicht angefangen' [27:16]

⁷⁵ 'Im *real* life hab ich mich ziemlich isoliert und da hatte ich eigentlich nicht mehr wirklich Lust zu. Ging mir halt ziemlich aufn Sack' [10:24]

⁷⁶ 'Nen anderes Spiel gezockt' [22:58]

⁷⁷ 'Auf jeden Fall große Leidenschaft, fertig. Ohne das geht's nicht' [23:05]

⁷⁸ 'Ist beides wichtig! ... *Real* Life etwa 60, *WoW* 40' [36:54]

⁷⁹ 'Es ist einfach essentiell dafür, dass Du für 15 oder 10 Minuten lang im Boss-Fight 100% drauf konzentriert, und nicht irgend nen anderen Scheiß macht' [49:38]

⁸⁰ 'Das reale Leben hat da definitiv Vorrang. Ich bin nie so sehr involviert, auch während der Raids, dass ich das nicht mit krieg' [40:12]

5.3. Avatar–relationships

Avatars, gamers' in-game characters, are chosen by the gamer before placing a toe on *virtual* ground. Different groups, races, and sexes, including various options to modify the avatar's physical appearance, are available for gamers to choose from. The gamers' choices and their relationships to their in-game characters are of interest here because it raises the question of whether it is possible to speak of a relationship with a created character. If so, what kinds of relationships do exist? And what would gamers do for their avatars, in the sense of sacrifices? 'Traditional relationships' enclose wishes, fear, expectations, associations, and even decisions regarding life and death of avatars.

When interviewees were asked about their avatars, they mentioned main characters and 'Twinks', secondary characters. Also, every gamer selected a female avatar during the selection process as a main character, even though three interviewees were males. Gamer one even has two main avatars⁸¹ and both are female, because his main attention lies on physical attractiveness⁸². He did not like the appearance of male characters⁸³ – he wanted a 'cool' avatar, and not one that looks 'gay'⁸⁴. The same features mattered for gamer two, three and four. Gamer two added that characteristics were chosen according to 'prettiness'. Gamer one even claims that male gamers play about 90% of all female avatars in *World of Warcraft*⁸⁵.

All interviewed gamers have twinks, secondary characters. Gamer two uses her twink as a farm character only⁸⁶. Other gamers, like gamer one and three, only created twinks out of boredom – they were done with all duties for their

⁸¹ 'Ein weiblicher Mensch Krieger, und ein weiblicher Mensch Priester' [31:39]

⁸² 'Das ging wirklich nur ums Optische' [33:01]

⁸³ 'Das hatte einfach den Grund, weil ich finde, dass die männlichen Menschen bei WoW einfach scheiße aussehen' [32:12]

⁸⁴ 'Aber es geht einfach oft ums Optische. Aber gerade wenn man nen Nachtelfen spielt, also da spielt glaub ich niemand freiwillig nen männlichen Nachtelfen, weil die sehn einfach nur schwul aus!' [33:36]

⁸⁵ 'Also 90% der weiblichen Charaktere aufm Server sind Männer' [33:01]

⁸⁶ 'Ich brauchte Jemanden, der für mich meine Fläschchen macht, und mir die 'Matz' zusammen farmt' [26:09]

main character and started playing twinks to have something to do, or to try out a new class or group⁸⁷.

Regarding the importance of twinks, gamer four said very clearly that twinks are totally unimportant to him⁸⁸. Gamer two shares that opinion⁸⁹. All other gamers only talked about the importance of their main avatars. It seemed logical that the choice of name for the avatar would be as revealing as the choice of appearance. Instead, random names were chosen most of the time. In this context, when the interviewer asked gamers about their avatars' names, gamer four mentioned that he had changed his main avatar's name when his attitude towards the game changed⁹⁰. Before that change happened, he was particularly serious about the game, spent long hours in Azeroth and he had therefore chosen a serious name for his avatar that mirrors his style of gameplay. Gamer four then changed from a serious to a fun-driven attitude and he therefore also changed his avatar's name accordingly. Not only the names changed, but also assets gamer four associated with both names. The original name, used when he played more seriously, was associated with strength. These days, his avatar's name is more related to fun, because that is the reason for him playing the game now⁹⁰. Gamer three, in contrast, heard a name in a movie, liked it and it was available in the game⁹¹, so he did not associate any specific assets of his avatar with the name, except that it was pleasing. Gamer one did almost the same – the name was not chosen with special care, but still took him a while to decide⁹². In contrast to the previous

⁸⁷ 'Das ist ja gerade der Punkt, dass WoW halt relativ schnell langweilig wird, weil man halt immer das selbe macht, und das sehr sehr lange. Das ist auch so ne Beschäftigung. Man versucht halt dabei irgendwelche Items abzugreifen, um seinen twink halt irgendwie auszurüsten, so gut es geht' [gamer one: 38:38] ; 'Aus langer Weile, weil man Lust hat, irgend nen anderen Char zu spielen' [gamer 3: 20:55]

⁸⁸ 'Meine Nebencharaktere sind mir eigentlich schon ziemlich scheiß egal' [31:00]

⁸⁹ 'Der [Twink] ist total egal' [26:20]

⁹⁰ 'Also ich hab ja zwei Namen, weil damals hatt ich nen anderen Namen als jetzt' [08:33] ; 'Also mit dem alten Namen hab ich schon sowas wie Stärke verbunden, aber der jetzige Name...weiß nicht. Also, meine Einstellung hat sich irgendwie geändert zu WoW. Dass ich irgendwie jetzt mehr aus Spaß spiele, anstatt ich da jetzt ernst ran gehe an die Sache. Sprich der Name ist auch eher ein Bisschen mit Spaß verbunden' [09:09]

⁹¹ 'Den hatt ich mal in nem Film gesehen. Das war ne Betitelung von irgend so ner Firma und fand ich gut. Dachte mir so ach, den nehm ich' [19:51]

⁹² 'Ich tu mich immer sehr schwer mit irgendwelchen Namen irgendwo. Ich hab sehr sehr lange überlegt, aber mir fiel halt einfach nichts Gutes ein. Und dann hab ich einfach irgendwann das genommen, was mir ein fiel [...]Also da steckt kein tieferer Sinn dahinter' [35:36]

two, gamer two selected her avatar's name carefully: it had to sound nice, not be too common, but still have a *real* connection to the game *World of Warcraft*⁹³. Gamer two is also the only one who admits to be hiding behind her avatar's name in order to stay anonymous⁹⁴.

All gamers were asked if they would ever accept an offer by someone to pay *real* cash for their *World of Warcraft* account, avatars and items related to it. Not one participant said he or she would sell the account. In case gamer two should ever stop playing *WoW*, she would preserve the account⁹⁵. Gamer four in contrast would rather delete his account and avatars than sell them to someone⁹⁶, partly because they are his, and partly because he wants others to go through the learning process of spending time, failing, learning and finally achieving in *WoW*⁹⁷.

5.4. *Personal satisfaction*

It is every person's hope to be successful at some point in life, especially in *real* life, but modern technology offers the chance now to be successful on another level: in *virtual* life. Success often goes hand in hand with power and provides personal satisfaction at the same time. This part of the interview and all received answers provide a deeper understanding of success in *World of Warcraft* and its correlated effects.

The first aspect that was pointed out by gamer one in regard to game success and satisfaction was that he himself has always been looking for the best guild and gamers to play together with⁹⁸. Also, he asserted that gamers put a

⁹³ 'Ähm, ich wollte halt nen Namen, der für mich gut klingt und den ich halt, ähm, den's nicht so häufig gibt, der ne Verbindung zu WoW hat' [23:13]

⁹⁴ 'Ich versteck mich eher hinter dem Namen' [23:38] ; 'Ich muss das nicht unbedingt haben, dass andere Leute so viel von mir wissen, aus meinem Privatleben' [24:06]

⁹⁵ 'Definitiv einfrieren. Also den Account einfach auslaufen lassen, und der Char bleibt ja bestehen. Er bleibt unendlich bestehen' [43:30]

⁹⁶ 'Dann lösche ich lieber alle meine Chars' [31:45]

⁹⁷ 'Ich find's halt wichtig, dass man die Sachen, die man in Spielen irgendwie hat, dass man die selber erreicht hat' [32:33]

⁹⁸ 'Es gibt so drei große Gruppen auf unserem Server. Und diese drei Gruppen haben sich immer wieder zu neuen Gilden formiert. Diese drei Top-Gilden praktisch bei uns aufm Server. Zwischen denen bin ich ab und zu immer mal hin-und-her gesprungen' [18:48]

lot of time and dedication to *World of Warcraft* in order to battle difficult bosses and to be successful in raids⁹⁹. Gamer four extended gamer one's view by even adding the levelling success as a reason for playing the game¹⁰⁰. In addition, he also mentioned that his own success is more important than the success of the guild¹⁰¹. Fun and success are reasons for gamer three to play *World of Warcraft* in general¹⁰². Gamer two pointed out that she is very proud of her more than 9,000 success points, 100 pets, her collection of rare mounts and her equipment¹⁰³. According to gamer one, progress-orientation, the goal to be the best on the server, leads to success¹⁰⁴.

Gamer three mentioned an interesting aspect: Guild members criticise each other for poor performance in *WoW*, but that will actually lead to better performance in the future, as well as to success as its outcome¹⁰⁵. However, if gamers repeatedly do not perform as desired by the guild, they will be excluded from raids¹⁰⁶. Gamer one has been in the position of leading a guild and selects gamers for raids in accordance to their in-game performance¹⁰⁷.

⁹⁹ 'Wir haben hard dadrin geraided, wirklich viel Energie da rein gesetzt' [12:13]

¹⁰⁰ 'Man hat sich halt immer so gedacht: joa, da kann ich ja eben noch ein Level machen, dauert ja nicht so lang' [19:33]

¹⁰¹ 'Ich find meinen Erfolg schon wichtiger' [16:14]

¹⁰² 'Spaß, Erfolg' [26:44]

¹⁰³ 'Es gibt ja in WoW das Erfolgs-Punkte-System, das Du für alles Mögliche irgendeinen Erfolgspunkt bekommst. Das sind irgendwelche Erfolge in Instanzen, da musst Du besondere Dinge machen, um die zu erreichen. Oder Haustiere sammeln, oder Reit-Mounts sammeln, und mein Char hat relativ viele Erfolgspunkte. Ähm, es sind über 9.000!' [26:53] ; 'Seltene Mounts und seltene Erfolge [...] also mein Char ist mir unheimlich wichtig [...] Dann die ganzen Raid-Erfolge, mein Equip' [27:31]

¹⁰⁴ 'Sehr Progress-orientiert [...] Ich wollt immer der beste sein aufm Server. Oder mit zu den besten gehören. Das war die Motivation, die ich dran hatte. Erster zu sein. Oder nicht erster, aber zumindest einer der ersten' [20:09]

¹⁰⁵ 'Ich nehm sie zur Kenntnis und mach's nächste Mal besser' [18:14]

¹⁰⁶ 'Definitiv. Das muss Auswirkungen auf die Selektierung für den nächsten Raid haben [...] Wenn jetzt jemand wiederholt immer wieder Fehler gemacht hat, dann muss ich einfach sagen 'ey, Du kriegst es grad einfach nicht hin, Du musst jetzt raus', und da kommt jemand anderes rein' [56:23]

¹⁰⁷ 'Das ist meine Aufgabe gewesen, das zu machen [...] Ich denk ich hab ein ganz gutes Gespür dafür entwickelt. Allerdings manchmal muss man den Leuten halt auch knallhart sagen, wie's ist und einfach sagen sorry, Du kriegst es einfach grad net hin. Ich kann Dich net mit nehmen' [56:23]

Gamer two, who said that bad performance during raids could lead to getting expelled from the guild in the most extreme case, seconded this aspect¹⁰⁸.

Gamer three mentioned that he feels powerful and successful in *World of Warcraft* because he generates high *Damage Per Second (DPS)*¹⁰⁹, which is very beneficial for his guild during boss fights. Also, he sees himself as an advanced gamer who knows the game, his avatar and his abilities well¹¹⁰. Also gamer two, the only female gamer interviewed, sees herself as very important for the success of her guild because she causes much damage to bosses and plays her avatar well¹¹¹. Gamer one said in this matter that he gets major personal satisfaction from gameplay and in-game success. He is proud to be one of the best gamers in the guild who are critical for its success¹¹². In contrast to all other gamers, interviewee four stated that he sees himself as *not* very special and important for the success of his guild¹¹³. However, at the same time his own success in the game is more important for him than the success of his guild¹¹⁴.

5.5. Entertainment

Entertainment. One could say life is entertainment – either in a positive enjoyable way, or in a negative boring and worrying way. Or, one expects life to be all about entertainment. In this regard, and in reference to this thesis, entertainment is all about the way people spend their free time and how well they feel when being entertained.

¹⁰⁸ 'Aus der Gilde geschmissen wirst, wenn Du noch Test-Member bist, natürlich. Wenn Die Gilde empfindet, dass zu viele Fehler gemacht werden bzw. zu wenig Schaden kommt, dann ist das für so eine Gilde nicht tragbar [...] dann fliegt man' [30:39]

¹⁰⁹ reflects the amount of damage that gamers inflict on enemies in one second

¹¹⁰ 'Du hast direkt nen Plan, wie Du was drücken musst, damit Du's am besten kombinierst, damit Du möglichst hohe DPS raus kriegst, was dann im Endeffekt Deinen Char wieder nach vorne bringt' [24:04]

¹¹¹ 'Dadurch dass ich ganz ganz viel Schaden mache und ganz oben immer bin, natürlich schon als festes Mitglied' [37:04]

¹¹² 'Ich war immer wichtig für die Gruppe, weil ich war immer einer, der erst- oder zweitbeste Heiler, oder ich war der Tank, der sowieso immer wichtig ist, oder ich war immer einer der besten Damage Dealer, Platz eins bis fünf mindestens, je nach Boss [...] aber ich war immer irgendwie tragend für den Raid' [45:32]

¹¹³ 'Ich find mich eigentlich ziemlich entbehrlich' [15:08]

¹¹⁴ 'Ich find meinen Erfolg schon wichtiger' [16:14]

Gamer one was against the game *World of Warcraft* at the beginning¹¹⁵, but a friend let him play¹¹⁶ and he started enjoying it¹¹⁷, even though he had no specific expectations¹¹⁸. The same happened to gamer four: he was introduced to the game by a friend¹¹⁹ and had no expectations¹²⁰. In regard to that matter, gamer two said that nobody starts the game *World of Warcraft* without either not knowing the game and what it is all about, or without knowing anyone playing it¹²¹. The described introduction process is known under the name of snowballing.

Gamer one, who emphasized that community is the most important feature of the game, also named it the main reason for *World of Warcraft* being entertaining¹²².

All five themes, being community, personal dilemma, avatar-relationships, personal satisfaction and entertainment, that were identified as substantial and reliable concepts, were discussed in this chapter. Discussion has proven the validity of relevance of the chosen order of themes and has unveiled interesting aspects that helped me to answer my research question and that also represent the foundation for my grounded theory.

¹¹⁵ 'Am Anfang [war ich] ein ziemlicher Gegner von WoW' [04:52]

¹¹⁶ 'Ein Kumpel hat mir das dann gezeigt und hat mich bei sich dann ein Bisschen spielen lassen' [04:52]

¹¹⁷ 'Das hat dann einfach Spaß gemacht' [05:17]

¹¹⁸ 'Ich hatte da eigentlich nicht besonders viele Erwartungen' [06:47]

¹¹⁹ 'Ein Kollege von mir hat das damals auch gezoockt und der hat gesagt ich soll das mal spielen' [03:35]

¹²⁰ 'Erwartungen hatte ich nicht wirklich' [04:01]

¹²¹ 'Also es fängt keiner an, der WoW nicht kennt, oder der nicht mindestens ein oder zwei Leute kennt, die das spielen' [14:36]

¹²² 'Es ging da eigentlich nur noch um die Leute' [39:37]

Chapter 6

- Conclusion, discussion and answers to the research question -

After introducing the topic of gamer identity and presenting the research question 'In what ways does online-gaming affect gamer identity?', I gave an overview of important background knowledge about the game *World of Warcraft* and proceeded to review relevant literature. A chapter about the methodology and methods I applied followed those three chapters. The data gathered, by following the procedures described, was presented in Chapter five. In this chapter, I will provide my answer to the research question and then elaborate the data that made me draw those conclusions.

6.1. Grounded theory and answer of the research question

Interviews and observation have shown that first of all gamers have to be attracted by online gaming. The game has to be appealing, curiosity and momentum have to be generated and people have to try out the game. In most cases, gamers go to a store and buy a game that looks interesting and the description sounds promising. *World of Warcraft* does not seem to belong to that sort of games. Instead, as I learned from my research participants, gamers have to be introduced to *World of Warcraft* by people already playing it. This shows that incentives in form of first hand experience have to be given to gamers, which is most likely also the reason for computer game exhibitions to take place. New games are presented and available for gamers to try out and those new releases are expected to generate enough interest and momentum that gamers want to continue playing it. Also, hype for upcoming games or a sequel of a successful game is generated at such events.

The fact that people started and continued playing *World of Warcraft* after a relatively short introduction to the game by friends made clear that Blizzard Entertainment programmed and designed the game in a very appealing way that encourages gamers to spend time in the world of Azeroth. It has been one of my aims for this study to identify 'catching factors', features of the game that create encouragement, that keep gamers interested in the game so that they pay for the membership and return to the game regularly.

Castronova (2007) emphasized the importance of game design in his book '*Exodus to the virtual world – How online fun is changing reality*'. Most game production companies place high importance on graphics and are trying to make the game as realistic and absorbing as possible. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, graphics are important, but are not the main reason for millions of gamers playing it. Instead, motivation is gained from different factors.

Before gamers enter the world of Azeroth, they select an avatar, and modify its appearance in accordance to personal preferences. This process creates an online in-game identity that is in a way pre-given because of a limited number of races available that gamers can choose from. However, personal changes regarding visual appearance and attractiveness, combined with avatars professions, abilities and a name personalises it and makes it gamers' third identity: an online identity that is influenced by gamers' offline identities. However, this third identity is not entirely new because it basically is an extension of the offline *self-identity* only. Gamers pull avatars' strings and thereby dictate their actions and behaviour within the 'frontiers' of the game – online identities are influenced by gamers' offline identities, which make them a fusion of both worlds.

Due to the fact that gamers are allowed to have several secondary game characters, also referred to as *twinks*, they can have additional impacts on gamers' self-identities. However, as interviewees pointed out, twinks are not seen as important as the main character and are mostly not cared for. Gamers' reasons for twink-existence are either boredom or the search for further experience. Gamers want to play a different race and try out that race's abilities, for instance. Twinks are often also not levelled up to play

high-end content, are therefore not able to join guilds and participate in raids, and hence gamers do not develop a relationship. Only the main avatar is able to play high-end content because it has the required level and carries powerful armour and weapons to properly support fellow guild members in boss fights. The main avatar is valuable to gamers and is played most of the time for those reasons.

Castronova (2007) provides a valid aspect: "A virtual world's entire existence is predicated on the provision of good experiences for the user" (p. 43). Good experiences while fighting enemies and exploring the world of Azeroth are definitely provided by the game, but what about negative experiences like losing fights, dying in the game, or flaming from other gamers? Such experiences are not positive at all and influence gamers' moods. However, good experiences, especially community and satisfaction, influence gamers more and are reasons for dedication to the game *World of Warcraft*.

Satisfaction is achieved by including a reward system in *World of Warcraft* that gives gamers in the game what should be given to them in *real* life as well: immediate gratification and continuous rewards for good performance and success. The looting system in *WoW* is one option to present rewards to gamers. The other, and especially in the beginning much more encouraging aspect that provides happiness when successfully completing quests and achieving goals, is the levelling system. It shows that when gamers devote time and dedication to the game and its required tasks, then they can be successful and satisfied because they get rewarded for their performance. Also, the reward is given immediately after successfully completing a job, and is not time-displaced, as it frequently is the case in *real* life, if rewards are ever provided. Often, there is no reward at all in reality, no spoken word, nothing. People are always waiting for feedback regarding their performance, no matter whether it is online or offline, and appreciate bonuses a lot. Therefore, rewards influence identity and due to the fact that they are provided in the online game *World of Warcraft*, they definitely affect gamer identity positively.

Collected data for this thesis has shown and confirmed that gamers define their own identities online in a similar way they shape them offline in the *real* world: identity alters in accordance to the environment inhabited and is shaped by social interactions over time. The avatar is a pre-set identity by Blizzard Entertainment, but its identity gets advanced and modified by the gamer once chosen and taken to the world of Azeroth. Simultaneously to the process of the gamer shaping the avatars' identity, the avatar, the game and all gamers inhabiting this *virtual* environment shape the gamers' two identities: the *self-identity* when exploring the world and taking decisions alone, and the social identity when playing in a group and interacting with fellow gamers.

I found out that gamers' motivation changes when they reach high levels, when they are about to play high end content and join guilds, groups of likeminded people following the common goal of being successful in the online game *World of Warcraft*. Guilds are the plots where social identity gets fertilized, grows and blooms. Those *virtual* communities, as all interviewees told me, encourage gamers to interact with each other, to devote time in favour of that community and to clear tasks in the game as a team. One reason for this behaviour is the existence of vital communication in guilds due to the 'ease of communication', the elimination of communication barriers, which creates a common ground for likeminded people. Socializing in *WoW* takes place in similar ways to the *real* world, with the exception that the place for it to happen is moved to another level, to an online world, and that communication is computer-mediated instead of face-to-face, as it often is the case in *real* life. This situation is very attractive to gamers of *World of Warcraft* in general, but especially to guild members as they communicate very vital and openly with each other using various channels of communication. Such behaviour feeds the hunger to know more about fellow guild members. Extended communication, especially during raids, makes gamers involve their offline social identities in the *virtual* environment of *World of Warcraft*.

Guilds are like families in the *virtual* world: guild members trust each other, rely on each others' performance and skills in raids and share common goals. Besides trust, such behaviour displays the establishment of friendships, as

well as an active community feeling, which is a family-like bond. Also, gamers seem to disclose personal details and even share private data and contact details of their *real* life with other gamers, which brings them closer together again. The more you know about someone, the more you care and the more you also associate with that person. Therefore it is no surprise that extended socializing sometimes even leads to an extension of originally solely *virtual* friendships from the *virtual* world to *real* life, where even meetings of fellow guild members are possible, and friendship hence moves between societies. As a result of the research, I can confirm that gamer two claimed during the interview correctly that the game itself moves to the background and it is all about guilds and community¹²³ when high-end content is played and groups of like-minded gamers are joined.

All presented elements influence gamers' identity and shape it accordingly by creating a social identity alongside their personal offline identities. The more gamers interact, the more the edges between online and offline identities blur based on the concept of migration in the context of the research conducted. Also, this research has shown that avatars in the online game *World of Warcraft* are, in a way, the carrier of gamers' souls, and therefore are also a carrier of their identities. It is not quite the same situation as it is in Buddhism, where the soul leaves the mortal body behind and settles in a new body as part of reincarnation, but it is rather the case that gamers' souls, carrying their offline self and social identities, are mirrored and an identical copy is in the game, in the avatar. There, they partly create, but mainly influence gamers' online in-game identity. The gamer controls all actions and communicates with fellow gamers from a chair placed in front of a computer screen.

An easy way is walked more often than a difficult one. The same applies to playing *WoW* because access to the game is easy. I hereby refer to the 'ease of migration', whereby only a couple of mouse-clicks separate *real* and *virtual* life. Gamers therefore do not have to be strong or well trained, but everyone having a computer and Internet access, as well as a paid for account with Blizzard Entertainment, can easily enter the world of Azeroth. Also, in addition

¹²³ 'Das Spiel besteht eigentlich nur aus Community' [13:57]

to an easy access to *WoW*, the game is playable 24/ 7 with only short interludes caused by regular server-updates by Blizzard Entertainment. This gives gamers the option to spend long hours in the world of Azeroth. Once there, they can command their avatar and explore the *virtual* world.

The data gave the impression that gamers do not seem to mind that the time spent online increases by getting more involved in the game *World of Warcraft* and by becoming a member of a guild. For instance, *real* life activities depend on gamers' schedules in *virtual* life because once gamers signed up for a raid, they have to be there at a specific time and fight with the guild for the common goal of defeating bosses, in-game enemies, collecting loots and advancing the guild's success history, which is directly linked to its ranking in the game's statistics. That means that gamers' *real*-life activities get arranged around *virtual* life's duties and appointments, and not the other way around. All interviewees also acknowledged that these limitations have drastic influences on and consequences for gamers' *real* lives. Spending long hours playing the game and talking together creates shared identity (IJsselsteijn, 2004, p. 136) and priority is therefore given to the game. Alongside with time-compensation comes isolation from the *real* world. Instead of spending time with family and friends, many gamers spend main parts of their lives in front of a computer playing this specific online game.

However, it is not only the involvement with the game itself and guilds that tie gamers to the online environment, but also a form of 'escapism' is present. It cannot be found from the beginning on, but develops over time. The more gamers play, the more they get involved and thereby the more they isolate themselves. Accordingly, the more problems occur in *real* life as results of that behaviour. Consequences of extended game play in means of school problems, loss of friendships and family issues, for instance, were identified in this research. Therefore, I am convinced that this practised escapism also is a getaway from self-created problems, alongside the attractiveness (e.g. awards and community) provided by game design.

Another indicator that practices in *virtual* life are very similar to *real* life is that gamers talked about situations like failure that are handled in both worlds, *real*

and *virtual*, in a very similar way: bad performance is criticized immediately and even warnings are given before repercussions occur for everyone involved. Similarly, criticism is used as a way to motivate people to perform better and to urge dedication. All guild practices create a strong feeling of belonging and loyalty towards the in-group, which encourages time dedication, presence, communication and support. This practice is an ever-occurring bonding session that fosters the sense of belonging and provides wellbeing when online. Favouritism of the in-group also triggers competition with other guilds and is a driver for being dedicated and progress-oriented.

The realization that life in *World of Warcraft* is much more challenging, rewarding and entertaining alike, combined with isolation from *real* life, which actually is a re-orientation, and major involvement and time devotion in favour of the guild and the game in general, all influence gamer identity. Therefore, the appeal of life in the *virtual* environment of *World of Warcraft* is much stronger than of *real* life. Hence, gamers develop a 'sense of being there' and a strong 'sense of belonging', of being part of the whole, which indicates that it has never been gamers' intention to separate from society. They have only taken the decision to move to and care for another society, online, in the game *World of Warcraft*, that is more fulfilling and exciting for them. A society, by definition, is a large group of people living in the same geographical territory and following set rules and regulations (Treffry, Isaacs, & Ferguson, 2000, p. 1129). In the case of *World of Warcraft*, the geographical territory is the world of Azeroth, which is populated by avatars played by people from all over the world, meeting each other in one *virtual* environment.

The present research and its outcomes taught me that avatars can be seen as a two-sided sword: an encouragement to unveil and develop the personal identity on one side, and as a mask to hide behind, to preserve privacy, as emphasized by gamer two. *World of Warcraft* offers different masks in means of different groups of avatars available to choose from. Nevertheless, gamers shape their avatars according to their own passion. Feelings and attributes associated with avatars and their perception by others in the game, like being well prepared, being on time for instance, might only be associated with that

avatar and are not taken to *real* lives, as gamer one mentioned in the interview. This suggests that gamers' avatars, their in-game identities, do not affect their *real* identities.

The originally named prediction of gamers having several identities is correct. However, the number of those identities needs to be adjusted and clarification has to be provided. Gamers playing *World of Warcraft* have two identities, like every other person not playing the game: a *self-identity*, and a social-identity when interacting with other people. Both identities migrate between environments. They get mirrored and can be influenced and affected by both, the *real* and the *virtual* world. Identities alter due to the fact that they are made over time, in a process, and are shaped by a person's environment. Gamers inhabiting two environments and migrating from one to the other regularly without much effort definitely have their identities influenced and altered by both environments.

Thanks to the interpretive paradigm and my desire to understand human behaviour in a specific situation in a very deep and rich way, as well as the decision to apply the principle of *Verstehen*, I gained deep insights and was able to answer my research question and generate my grounded theory regarding gamer identity at the same time.

6.2. Discussion

Both applied methods, interviews and observation, provided extensive data that was coded by establishing themes according to occurrence, repetition and passion. The five different themes were then organized in accordance with the emphasis given by the research participants: (1) community, (2) personal dilemma, (3) avatar-relationships, (4) personal satisfaction, and (5) entertainment.

6.2.1. Community

As chapter five showed, the data revealed five themes, of which the first was community. The concept of community emerging from the interviews included belonging, trust, friendships, anonymity and informal, friendly communication. The research participants appeared to have a strong sense of their identity in the Azeroth community, which suggests that there is less dislocation between the online and offline worlds. I posit that this lack of dislocation, despite long hours out of the *real* world in Azeroth, is because of ease of migration and powerful communication tools. The latter includes verbal communication, made available via the third party software 'TeamSpeak', chats and communication on guilds' websites. Diverse and vital interactions are an indicator that the removal of communication barriers that Castronova (2007, pp. 173 ff.) refers to: lack of common interest and difficulties with face-to-face communication, are exactly what creates and maintains community in *World of Warcraft*. Even though it is laudable that the game eliminates communication barriers and encourages vivid communication, it also fosters a new problem alike: isolation from the *real* world (Robinson & Davis, 2001). Playing the game *World of Warcraft* on high-end level, being a member of a guild and participating in vibrant communication consumes time and therefore gamers need to compromise *real*-life time in favour of the game, which encourages separation from other people and from their surroundings in the *real* world, which, as a result, leads to extended isolation.

In other words, the participants develop their identity in Azeroth much as people do in the *real* world: through self-understanding gained by interpersonal interactions. Trust leads to self-disclosure of the *real* world identity. Trust also encourages and extends socialization of gamers while inhabiting the *virtual* world of Azeroth. Nobody wants to be alone and people have the desire to communicate and to share information, viewpoints and experiences with others. This exchange of knowledge and the possibility of making friends as a result of socializing, are all attractive features in *real* life that appear to be carried over into the *virtual* environment of *World of Warcraft*.

It is not only the question what the guild gives to gamers and what it allows them to achieve, but it also matters how important gamers see themselves for the support and well-being of the guild. Some gamers contribute more to the guild than time and skills to successfully fight bosses. It appears that the guild is seen as a family to which not only physical support is provided, but psychological help as well. One interviewee talked about her role as ‘mother of the nation’¹²⁴, which reflects her importance for the guild and all of its members because fellow guild members approach her with problems of any kind and ask her for advice regularly, which, in return, provides her with personal satisfaction. At the same time, gamers holding such a key position in a guild not only gain personal fulfilment out of the described situation, but they also contribute significantly to community building. Interaction, the sharing of personal information and the knowledge that there is someone who listens and provides advice strengthens the frame of the guild and ties its members closer together. The reason for a gamer to become the ‘mother of the nation’ is trust. It encourages and extends socializing, as I had already mentioned. Other gamers have to see that gamer as social, knowledgeable, trustworthy and experienced in order to ask her for advice. The act of approaching someone and talking about personal matters with the aim to get advice, solve or overcome a situation is a disclosure that exceeds the presentation of personal data mentioned earlier. Besides an extended disclosure, it also requires gamers searching advice to realize that they need help from someone else without feeling ashamed or weak for that reason.

As outlined in the literature review section, Diehl and Prins (2008, p. 101) identified “multiuser-virtual environment[s]”, *WoW* being one itself, as “a potent medium for socializing – it provides people with a way to express, explore and experiment with identity”. This quote provides four aspects that were found in the data gained from interviews conducted. First of all, there is the term ‘socializing’, which closes the circle at this point and refers right back to the introduction to this section. It is part of human behaviour to communicate with others. This equally portrays the second aspect mentioned – ‘expression’ – regardless of the channel chosen at this point. When the term

¹²⁴ ‘Ich bin immer die Mutter der Nation’ [34:14]

socializing is used anywhere, I immediately think of friends coming together, having a BBQ, small talking and enjoying themselves. Actually, a parallel can be seen in the game *World of Warcraft*: guild members come together, have a raid, discuss strategies, exchange information and enjoy themselves, according to their preferred way of interacting.

Socialization in *WoW* gives gamers the “sense of being there”, the impression to be an important part of the whole and to experience it first hand, which is Steuer’s (1992, p. 80) psychological phenomenon of *presence*. It is achieved by the existence of two criteria: vividness and interactivity. Game design features of the game *World of Warcraft*, especially guilds and various communication channels, achieve those criteria and make gamers talk about experiences in the *virtual* world of Azeroth as if they all took place in *real* life. Responsible for this lived experience can be the act of exploring the world of Azeroth, which is the third aspect, mentioned in the quote of Diehl and Prins (2008, p. 101).

During the interviews conducted, I expected gamers to mention the fun factor as the most important driver to enter the world of Azeroth, but to my surprise it would not have been addressed directly, unless I had brought it up. There were times when I sensed that interviewees were referring to fun indirectly, but that always occurred in relation to community. The existence of community and the option to socialize are matters of game design and are totally opposite to the main reason mentioned in the literature (Castronova, 2007): the creation of *virtual* environments for users in search for fun.

The avatar and its given name create gamers’ identity and can be equally seen as a mask that provides anonymity. This mask slowly falls into pieces and anonymity gradually fades when gamers join guilds and spend long hours playing the game *World of Warcraft* together with fellow gamers, as mentioned before. Although, the extent and speed of that disintegration totally depend on gamers’ willingness to share details and it therefore lies entirely in their hands.

When talking about guilds, masks, identity and anonymity, I have to mention that I did expect gamers to talk about behavioural changes and I was ready to

observe them as well. In my literature review chapter, I also talked about the possibility of anonymity creation and behavioural changes by deindividuation (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 304) according to the game's requirements, but this seems to be mostly eliminated by the guild's environment that even encourages gamers to unveil part of their *real* identities.

One research participant mentioned that the sharing of personal *real* world information provided in the game thus matches the actual situation in *real* life¹²⁵. I would have expected differences, gamers making up stories, experimenting with their identity, the fourth aspect identified by Diehl and Prins (2008, p. 101), to make other gamers believe that they are stronger, wealthier or just different to their actual physical *real* life appearance in general, because only the voice of gamers is transmitted by using the third party software *TeamSpeak*. Actually, this situation itself, the fact of gamers giving their avatars a voice might make the game appear a bit more realistic on one hand, but on the other, it is a perfect way to hide, not to expose the *real* identity, because it is a voice-chat only and people pulling strings of avatars are not visible to other gamers.

In general, interviews and observation have unveiled that gamers who are excessively involved in the game *World of Warcraft* spend more time in the online world than the offline world. The guild's attractiveness as a source of caring, supportiveness and communication is a possible reason for such behaviour. 'common bond', the personal attraction of guilds, and 'common identity', the social attractiveness of the group to the gamer (Prentice et. al., 1994, p. 484) extend the reasons for further connection to the guild, and hence more time investment.

¹²⁵ 'Wenn's dann zu nem Gildentreffen kommt, sind dann die zuvor gewonnenen Informationen [...] dann deckungsgleich mit dem, was man dann sieht, und was man erlebt in der Zeit?' [41:34]; 'Ja, doch' [41:36]

6.2.2. *Personal dilemma*

Evaluation of the first theme showed that the creation of community in Azeroth is a rather positive and beneficial outcome for gamers and their social identity develops and gets fostered. The second theme alters the perspective on the picture this far. Personal dilemma, as introduced in chapter five, includes drawbacks and negative consequences of playing the game *World of Warcraft*.

Even though observation of behavioural patterns of research participants gave the impression of enthusiasm, it made me wonder whether it is a real testimonial or only 'dictated' by the game. When talking about dedication, I am referring to the situation that the game and the guild are demanding in the matter of time devotion, and high expectations of guild members need to be fulfilled. The world of Azeroth is spacious with its three continents and several islands (please see the map of the world of Azeroth in figure 2.2.2. on page nine) that make diverse adventures available to gamers. Guilds, groups of like-minded and dedicated gamers desire to successfully complete missions available, which require time, patience, dedication and skills from every single member of the guild. Speaking of guilds, they expect gamers to follow their raid schedule, which makes them bound to a set routine. The agenda gives gamers only limited space to move and spend time in the world of Azeroth according to their own desires because they have to be online at a specific time, ready to fight with fellow guild members. Other gamers are also demanding because they are progress-oriented and want to succeed, they want to advance their avatars and achieve a better position in the game's ranking system. Dissatisfaction of fellow guild members' performances is expressed by flaming. This criticism is given verbally in *TeamSpeak* and is heard by other guild members as well. Gamers, as every other person, prefer commendation and they therefore do their best not to be the cause for flaming. Hence, pressure and stress lies on gamers' shoulders and leads to them talking about addiction. It has never been the intention of this study to find out if the game leads to addiction or not, but as gamers mentioned it themselves, especially without being asked for it, I have to include it in my

findings. Awareness of the very encouraging nature of the game seems to be present, but I got the impression that gamers' behaviour is very similar to that of smokers: they know about the consequences and worst outcomes of it, but they still continue doing it. A social bond can be named as one of the reasons for not giving up a negative behaviour and it obviously applies to *WoW*. Consequences, in means of family issues, health problems and education and job deficits, were named by research participants and show gamers' awareness and their gaming habits, including extended time devotion to the game *World of Warcraft*. The latter makes outsiders recognize changes in gamers' behaviour and talk about addiction.

Gamers' replies to questions about family and the importance given to it are contradictory. On one hand, gamers openly admit that the game, its requirements and their behaviour in accordance to the game *World of Warcraft* causes family issues in *real* life and no efforts seem to be taken to improve the situation. On the other hand, guilds that are family-like formations are named as very important and the main reason to play the game on high-end level. The latter is the reason for problems in *real* life and one would think that the *real* world is more important than a *virtual* environment. For guild members, the community feature of *World of Warcraft* and its enriching nature were named the most important reasons to play the game on high-end level. All identified game design aspects of *WoW* make the online environment more appealing. The game's expectations bring gamers together, let them mutually spend extended hours of game play and let them create communities of purpose that might consequently lead to friendships and thus importance is given to them. Also, the feature that the 'virtual family' is available around the clock seems to be an incentive for gamers to give more importance to 'strangers' in *virtual* life than to family and friends in *real* life.

Alongside the variation of importance given to social groups, the online game *World of Warcraft* causes isolation of gamers from their *real* lives, which results in an extended involvement in the community of the *virtual* world. The previous section regarding community moved attention to the idea that only a migrational shift takes place that is encouraged by incentives, in form of

success and rewards, among others, given by the game. Nevertheless, gamers only get a temporary, online-based satisfaction from the game and therefore frequently have to return to the world of Azeroth. Nothing material won, collected or given to gamers in *World of Warcraft* can be taken to the *real* world. Not even skills, extending the requirement to perfectly play the own avatar, seem to be learned and used outside the game. Exceptions are gamers occupying leading positions because they can learn and make use of leadership skills if they have not had them before. However, a reverse situation seems to be more likely to happen: abilities learned in *real* life are taken to the *virtual* environment if useful and productive. Beck and Wade (2004) explained that abilities like multi-tasking and leadership skills are those required by companies and would therefore be beneficial for gamers in *real* life. However, it all depends on gamers themselves if they make use of it.

All information provided by participants of this study made clear that the originally anticipated need of gamers to be *in* the game at all times, to pay full attention to *World of Warcraft* over the complete length of raids is wrong. Actually, total focus is only required during boss fights that take place several times during raids and last about five to fifteen minutes each in average. Distractions like a ringing phone, for instance, are eliminated or ignored for the length of those events. Gamers want to be successful and also do not want their guild members to flame because they caused the guild to lose in the worst case, caused by a distraction during a boss fight. This desire also explains and partly justifies gamers' behaviour of isolating themselves from 'factors', including their families, that can cause distractions.

The original intention of "a virtual world's entire existence [being] predicated on the provision of good experiences for the user", as outlined by Castronova (2007, p. 43), cannot be totally confirmed in regards to the interviewees' replies concerning the game *World of Warcraft*. It actually rather raises the question why people keep playing the game, even though it has major drawbacks. An answer, including design aspects implemented in *WoW*, has been partly provided in the previous section (community) already. Other aspects will be discussed in the upcoming sections.

6.2.3. Avatar–relationships

Having talked about the very encouraging factor of community and the personal dilemma, which is rather discouraging, it is time to talk about avatars, characters used in *World of Warcraft*, now.

Life on Earth started with the Genesis, the creation of humanity (Tuell, 2005). A similar process, the creation of an avatar, is a mandatory act before gamers enter the world of Azeroth. This practice cannot be compared with the life cycle of a person in *real* life because the childhood is skipped and a fully-grown adult with power comes into the *virtual* world of Azeroth. I assume that the reason is mainly the audience: mature gamers want to play mature avatars in *WoW* and they do not want to wait for them to grow up. Also, children are not sent to war, but have to be protected instead.

Highly interesting is the fact that all interviewed gamers play female avatars, even though three are male. The gender choice indicates that gamers are more attracted by female avatars, mainly caused by the physical attractiveness¹²⁶, or the ‘prettiness’ as referred to by gamer two, and not by the temptation to switch gender. The body proportions of male avatars are either exaggerated, or the appearance does not align with gamers’ expectations. An overall similar situation can be experienced in *real* life as well – people are attracted by the way others look and by the way they dress for instance.

In extension to the requirement to create an avatar to start the adventure in the world of Azeroth, gamers are also given the option to awaken *twinks*, secondary characters. Even though I’ve been told that *twinks* are seen as mainly unimportant¹²⁷ to most gamers, every gamer seems to have at least one *twink*. The reason for the existence of *twinks* could be found in the relationship to the main avatar. Gamers desire to be skilled and successful with their main avatar and they therefore use secondary characters for training purposes. Otherwise, they serve as farmers for required goods or

¹²⁶ ‘Das ging wirklich nur ums Optische’ [33:01]

¹²⁷ ‘Meine Nebencharaktere sind mir eigentlich schon ziemlich scheiß egal’ [31:00]

even entertainers when gamers are bored. The avatar creation feature of the game *World of Warcraft* allows gamers to play God, within the given restrictions.

The game itself, including guilds, is very time consuming with a single avatar already. Having more avatars lets gamers spend more time in the *virtual* world, which might lead to more isolation from the *real* world and could therefore even result in more problems, which might lead to an escape into the *virtual* world again. This appears to be a cycle that is difficult for gamers to break out of.

Without paying attention to my speculation, the existence of a direct link between the name chosen for the avatar and the level of anonymity desired, I asked gamers about names given to their avatars. To my surprise, the sound of the name mattered more to gamers than its meaning, especially for male gamers. The difference might lie in the feminine nature – everything has to match, has to create a nice total, similar to outfits, makeup and jewellery. The name, as well as the avatar overall, is used as a mask to provide gamers with anonymity. At the same time, they have to like the name, recognize it when said by others, and gamers have to know that someone refers to them by saying that name. In other words, gamers have to recognize their names and must like the sound of it because they will hear it and read it often while playing *World of Warcraft* and talking to other gamers.

The existent and over a period of time established avatar-relationships can easily be identified according to the answers given by all participants of this study following my question regarding the likeliness to sell their accounts (including avatars, achievements, etc.) for *real* money. Gamers were shocked and took a defensive position, as if they wanted to protect their avatar from evil. Even though avatars are mature and powerful, and do not need any time to grow up, gamers still protect them from harm, like parents do with their children. Therefore it did not surprise me that not a single gamer considered selling the account, even if they would stop playing *World of Warcraft* for good and could make a fair amount of money. Preservation or even deletion of an account was mentioned as more likely and shows clearly what tight ties

gamers establish with their avatars over time. This situation is actually no surprise, considering the fact that gamers spend an enormous amount of time in the world of Azeroth, exploring places, solving tasks, fighting bosses, all side-by-side with their avatars. People consequently get closer and closer to their avatars and actively write their avatars' story.

All decisions taken for the avatar affect its 'life'. The in-game character follows the gamers' orders without complaining. One could therefore see the avatar as a slave of the gamer. Or, what I personally prefer, is to see the avatar as a carrier of the gamer's soul in the game. In this aspect, it is not quite the same situation as it is in Buddhism, where the soul leaves the mortal body behind and settles in a new body as part of reincarnation. It is rather the case that gamers' souls are mirrored and an identical copy is in the game, in the avatar. Gamers therefore think for their avatars and avatars in the world of Azeroth execute orders, decided by gamers.

6.2.4. Personal satisfaction

"A virtual world's entire existence is predicated on the provision of good experiences for the user" (Castronova, 2007, p. 43). This quote nicely sums up what this identified theme is all about. The game industry tries to provide what gamers are looking for to make their free time most enjoyable: success, power, control, personal fulfilment and maybe even peace of mind. There might be more reasons, but those listed are the most obvious to me.

Especially in the area of satisfaction, game design factors are very critical to the success of a game. I expected fun to be the most important element to guarantee personal satisfaction and economical success of the game alike, but the research findings showed, in contrast to other scholars (Beck & Wade, 2004; Flynt, 2006; Castronova, 2007) that community is the most important and most absorbing element. However, the game *World of Warcraft* is programmed and designed in a way that it provides satisfaction from the very

beginning. It does not take long to 'level up'¹²⁸, to learn new skills and to fight more dangerous enemies. Levelling success encourages gamers to return to the game. Besides rank advancements, gamers gain constant rewards, *loots*, for defeating enemies, which provide motivation to fight more and to be even more successful in battles in the future. Also, a network of quests makes sure that the game is not boring. Even though quests make the game more entertaining, there still is the option for boredom to occur when all daily or weekly tasks are done, as I pointed out in section 6.2.3. about avatar-relationships. However, this risk shrinks, but does not 'disappear' when gamers' avatars reach higher levels and quests get more comprehensive. This especially is the case when gamers join guilds and thereby become members of close communities, as outlined in the first part (6.2.1.) of discussion. Even so, higher level and extended quests are no ultimate guarantee for gamers to stay entertained. A common solution, or an option for gamers not to be struck by boredom is the awakening of *twinks*, secondary characters, as outlined in section 6.2.3.

The thrive to progress, which goes hand in hand with the desire to 'level up' and to receive better gear for avatars is, besides the in-game community, a very important encouragement for gamers to re-enter the game. Progress leads to success in the MMORPG¹²⁹ *World of Warcraft* and therefore most guilds are progress-oriented.

All avatars in the game represent power, no matter what race they are and no matter whether they are good (Alliance) or evil (Horde). In chapter two, I gave an overview of the game's structure and introduced aspects that support understanding of my research. Gamers can choose to play Warriors, Paladins, Mages and Taurens, amongst others. All those are either powerful by nature, in the meaning of strength, or they have the ability to use magic. Nevertheless, the avatars' power is no good if gamers do not know how to use it. Therefore, gamers must have avatar-specific knowledge and tactical skills. On the other hand, 'the game requires gamer[s] to use the avatars'

¹²⁸ Levelling is the advancement of avatars by successfully fighting enemies and thereby gaining experience

¹²⁹ Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

power and skills to succeed' (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 301). This interdependence is a situation that enriches gamer identity and brings gamers and their avatars closer.

Holding power also involves being responsible for all actions taken in the game. Zimbardo (2007) believes those gamers' power and skills "can be seen as a permission to demonstrate combative spirit, which reduces gamers' 'sense of personal accountability'" (p. 301). Information gained from interviews and observation shows that gamers are personally accountable for their avatars' actions, no matter whether it is before or during raids. If they fail to attend raids they signed up for in advance, or perform badly during those events repeatedly, gamers might either be excluded from raids, or even from the guild in the worst case, as learned from the data collected. Consequently, and against LeBon's theory (1895, transl. 1947), guild members in *World of Warcraft* are completely responsible for their actions during guild events and have to live with its consequences, which links back to the section 'personal dilemma' (6.2.2.) in this chapter.

In order to be successful, especially when dealing with high-end content, most gamers are totally loyal to their guild and fight for its success. The portrayed situation reflects the importance of community in the game *World of Warcraft* and supports section 6.2.1. of this chapter. In contrast to group loyalty, gamer four stated that his personal success matters more than the success of the guild¹³⁰. This could be interpreted as anti-social behaviour, but also as full support of the guild. He does everything to succeed on personal level, but at the level where he plays the game, groups of gamers are required and he therefore provides full support to make the guild succeed.

6.2.5. Entertainment

Entertainment is a selling factor in today's world and I therefore expected entertainment to be more important in *World of Warcraft*. Instead, I discovered

¹³⁰ 'Ich find meinen Erfolg schon wichtiger' [16:14]

that entertainment actually is the least mentioned and least encouraging factor to return to the world of Azeroth and to spend time online playing the game.

All interviewees started playing *World of Warcraft* only after they had received an incentive in the form of first hand experience from another person. This endorses my findings that the graphics, as part of game design, are not catching gamers' attention and keeping them involved in the game. Instead, it is the game's structure, including the levelling system, and especially its extended community that catches gamers' attention and ties them to *WoW*. Therefore it is no wonder that the game is assumed to be build around community.

I associate the term 'entertainment' not only to technological satisfaction, but also to presentations of talent, being live entertainment by people in the way of theatre, opera and circus for instance. All events mentioned can be classified as spectacles. One of the best-known spectacles is a masquerade, no matter whether it is the prestigious Venice masquerade, or a simple carnival. We, ourselves, live in a society where spectacle is ever-present (Boltanski, 1999, p. 176; Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 5-6). Following this argumentation, gamers' behaviour is entertainment in itself and is not different to other people's actions, except for the case that it takes part online, instead of in *real* life.

6.3. *Research benefits*

As a result of this research answering the question 'How does online gaming affect gamer identity?', there can be *real* benefits to research participants because they may discover a deeper understanding of their own gaming behaviour, their changing identity and occurring gaming-related issues in *real* life. Besides benefits to contributors, there may also be potential benefits to people who did not participate in this research project. By doing this research very respectfully and deeply, the researcher has been encouraged to offer people an answer of the research question, especially in the case of the game *World of Warcraft*, and a deeper understanding of their own behaviour, as well as the behaviour of other gamers. Also, information about the game provided in this thesis will help anyone interested in *WoW* to understand the game itself and game design factors that make *WoW* so appealing for many people from around the world. This thesis might also suggest ways of amendment if people are unhappy with the way things are going.

6.4. *Future research and limitations of current research*

Even though it was my intention to do very comprehensive research, I have to admit that it has limitations. First of all, I chose only one Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), '*World of Warcraft*', from all games in that genre available. My decision was based on the fact that *WoW* is the most successful game of its kind. Secondly, one single guild in the game *World of Warcraft* and four selected members of that guild were subject to questions and observation. Thirdly, all of those gamers are mature, very experienced and play high-end content. Therefore, they might have a different access point to and understanding of the game than younger gamers with less experience. Fourthly, all interviews and observation were undertaken online, without having the opportunity to observe and interpret body language. Also, I am confident that all participants have provided correct information about themselves and their gaming patterns, as well as their behaviour involved. However, I cannot eliminate that possibility.

As a consequence, future research could definitely involve more participants for future research in this field and I will also need to be more overarching in means of interviewing more gamers from different guilds. This will provide a wider scope and will make comparison possible. Also, an extended number of methods will be used, not only interviews and observation as it was the case for this study. In result, an even more valuable grounded theory can be found and shared.

With regard to the literature review section of this thesis I assumed to find out that the intention of the chosen mask in the game and its perception of that mask's meaning(s) by other gamers can vary. Unfortunately, no data regarding this matter could be gathered due to the fact that only members from one single guild were interviewed. When research in that field will be carried out again, it should definitely be considered interviewing members of different guilds so that data providing answers regarding the aspect of masks' perception can be found.

Taking it for granted that about nine out of ten male gamers play a female avatar in *World of Warcraft*, as mentioned by gamer one, one should find a very unbalanced population, many more women than men... This would mean that several women court men. We often find the exact opposite situation in *real* life. This could even be a psychological reason for men to play female avatars, but it was not part of my research to find an answer for that phenomenon and to prove it's correctness in the first place. However, it could be done for some later research in this field.

An other limitation of this research, which equally generates new nutritious ground for future research is the fact that this presented thesis was written before the release of a new AddOn of the game *World of Warcraft*, 'Cataclysm', that dramatically changes the world of Azeroth and could have consequences in regard to its attractiveness. The 'new world' will be much darker and could be negatively perceived, which would consequently raise the question if gamers will still perceive *World of Warcraft* as a valuable free time activity and therefore continue dedicating much time to the game. However,

the community stays the same and therefore I would assume it either stays unchanged, or communication continues by using other channels available.

6.5. Closing thoughts

Writing this thesis has been a journey with ups and downs. I like to compare it to a roller coaster ride, even though it took much longer. It has been worthwhile doing this research because it is located in an area that has not been much researched yet. Especially Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games are fairly young, but very popular already. Modern technology makes it very attractive and easy for people to escape their *real* surroundings for a certain time and enjoy a live without consequences. This research has shown that this specific free time activity has no consequences for the gamer in means of dying in *real* when the avatar dies in the game for instance, but it affects gamers' lives and their identities alike. Also, the community feature in the game, as well as the absence of communication barriers combined with several online communication channels available make it very appealing for gamers. Therefore, my research contributed to the generation of knowledge and non-gamers are able to understand people playing MMORPGs better: their motivation, their believes and their evaluation in regards to the game '*World of Warcraft*'.

Taking findings and limitations of this research into account, it clearly shows that there is potential for deepening and generating more knowledge and understanding when it comes to people playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games like *World of Warcraft*.

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Appendices

1. *Semi-structured interview questions*

1. Demographic Information
 - a) Age
 - b) Gender
 - c) Family status

2. Life History Information
 - a) Education
 - i. High school qualifications
 - ii. Post-secondary qualifications
 - b) Career history
 - c) Member of social clubs or institutions?
e.g. Toast Masters, AIESEC, or member of sports team

3. Current account of yourself as a player of the game '*World of Warcraft*'
 - a) General information regarding gameplay
 - i. When did you start playing '*WoW*'?
 - ii. Please tell me about your gaming habits and the amount of time you devote to playing '*World of Warcraft*'.
 - iii. Describe a typical day when playing the game?
 - iv. What attracted you to this kind of game?
 - v. How does playing '*WoW*' affect your family life?

- b) Guild-specific information
 - i. What guild are you a member of?
 - ii. For how long have you been a member of this guild?
 - iii. How many guilds were you a member of before that guild?
 - iv. How does the raid schedule with the current guild looks like? How many raids do you attend per week?
 - c) Do you play other Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) besides 'WoW'?
4. Avatar and guild correlations
- a) Avatar
 - i. What avatar have you chosen to be your main character in 'WoW'?
 - ii. How many secondaries do you have? Why?
 - iii. Do you feel attached to your avatar?
e.g. feelings of happiness, sadness and care
 - iv. What position do you play during raids in the guild?
 - b) Relationship between gamer, avatar and guild
 - i. Do you strictly follow set strategies, or do you define your own rules?
 - ii. How important do you see yourself for the success of the group?
 - iii. Is your own success more important than the guild's success? Why?
 - iv. Would you lose in order to help and support the guild? Why?
 - v. How important is the guild and its members to you?
 - vi. Do you notice what is happening around you while playing the game?

- c) Spaces of gameplay
 - i. Where do you play '*World of Warcraft*' most?
e.g. from home, internet café, college or university
 - ii. How does your gaming environment affect your game play?
 - d) Contact with other *WoW* gamers
 - i. How often do you get the chance to interact or play with other '*WoW*' gamers and guild members in *real* life?
 - ii. Have you met any of your guild members outside the game?
 - iii. How important is social interaction with '*WoW*' gamers for you?
 - iv. Do you contact other gamers only regarding '*WoW*'-related issues, or do you even consult them with personal problems?
5. In-game Vs. Out-of game?
- a) Interaction
 - i. Do speak more of to other gamers or your offline friends and family?
 - ii. Who do you call friends? Are guild members *real* friends?
 - iii. Do you believe to know them (gamers behind their avatar) as well as your friends outside the game?
 - iv. Do you have the impression that you can communicate within the game much better than outside the game?
 - v. How communicative are you in *real* life?

- b) Behaviour
 - i. What is more important for you: the game and the guild, or your own life, family and friends?
 - ii. Do success and defeat affect your behaviour in *real life*?
 - iii. Have you ever noticed or have you been told by others that you behave more aggressively while playing the game?
 - iv. Have you ever had the feeling of dedicating too much time to the game? Have there ever been negative impacts on *real life*?
 - v. Did you ever wonder what else you could have done with all the hours spent in 'WoW'? Would you have done anything differently?

6. Final thoughts?

2. Guidelines for observation

- Communication patterns
 - o Is there a leader?
 - o Language used = avatar-specific? Game-specific?
Understandable for outsider?
 - o Overuse of certain terms?
 - o Spoken words → on-screen action?
 - o What else is talked about during raid takes place (raid-unrelated)?

- Use of pets? Relationship with pets? → relates 2 own animals?

- Healing process
 - o What happens if healer is under attack? Team work = helping each other? Only by command or of free will?

- What if raid is unsuccessful? → Blaming each other?
(Blame – reasons 4 blame? Lots of ideas)

- Looting behaviour?

- Culture in the game

- Male players choose male avatars or only female avatars? Gender-role and construction?

- Beauty? Something other than war?

3. Coding

	Gamer 1	Gamer 2	Gamer 3	Gamer 4
COMMUNITY				
Communication	II√√√I√√X √X♦II√I♦II √XI	III√√I♦X♦ √♦X♦X√II X√	IX√II√♦I √√♦II√♦ √IX♦XI	II♦√II♦XI √
Sharing	III√√III√XX ♦III	II√♦♦X√♦ ♦♦	I♦√II√I	I√♦√II
Caring	III√II	II♦√♦♦√√	IX√	II
Friendship	III√√√X√√I √♦♦♦X	II♦♦I♦♦	II♦♦X♦√ I♦√X	I√√
Dedication	II√√II√√III♦ ♦III	II√I♦X♦I♦ X√	III√X♦X♦ √X	II√√III
Trust	I√X√I	IX♦X♦	IXI	I
Personal dilemma				
Family in RL	IX√II	II♦√I♦	II√III√	I♦√
Consequences PL	I√√√X√√I♦ I♦I♦II	II♦√♦X√I√ I♦XI♦XI♦ ♦	I√√√I♦X	I♦X♦I√√
Time	I√√♦X√√√II III√X√√I√II II♦III	II♦X√III√♦ IX♦♦X♦	IX√♦X♦ III♦√♦	IX♦√II√I♦ XII√X♦
Dissatisfaction	I√II	I		II
In-game consequences	III	II√♦	II	I
Avatar-relationships				
Companionship	I√√♦	I√♦♦♦I	II√√♦	I√II♦
Shared experience	II√III	I√♦√√X♦ ♦I√♦	I√I√X√I√♦	I√II♦
Responsibility	♦III	I√I♦	I√III√	I√♦II
Gender Choice	I√♦♦I	I♦	I	II♦
Name	II	I√I√	I√	I♦I

Personal satisfaction				
Success	IIIV√√XIIIIII	I√I	II√II	III√
	√III			
Power	I√√III√	II		I
Rewards	IIII√◆I	IIIX◆	I√I	II√√
Team play	II√I√XIV√√I	I√I◆	II√√I◆√	II√√
	IIII			
Motivation	IIIIIV√III	I◆II	I	IIII
Entertainment				
Fun	III	I	II	III
Curiosity	I	II	I√	I
Adventure	II		I√	

Table 1: Visualized representation of relevant aspects mentioned by interviewed gamers

RL = *Real life*

PL = Personal life

I = Mentioned

√ = Repeated (brief)

◆ = Repeated (extended talk)

X = Emphasis

The coding sheet is a visual representation of relevant aspects that were mentioned during the interviews. With this coding, I established rigorously that these five (community, personal dilemma, avatar-relationships, personal satisfaction and entertainment) are in fact themes in my data that produced my grounded theory. Every symbol used was given a specific meaning and is listed under the table.