PRESSURES ON PLAY:
RHETORIC, VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS, AND THE DESIGN OF EXPERIENCE IN VIRTUAL WORLD COMPUTER GAMES

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Abstract

My dissertation explores the ways in which player interactions are shaped, directed and constrained by the designed experience of modern virtual world computer games from a rhetorical perspective. To that end, I develop a theory of "virtual consubstantiality" based on shared experiences within virtual environments as integral to virtual community formation. I examine two case studies to explore this concept.

First, I examine the massive multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. I identify three key pressures exerted on players within *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment: a focus on gameplay, a focus on the player utility, and the pressure to engage in "purposeful social interactions" with other players. I go on to document structures in *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment that reinforce these pressures: the implementation of a "dungeon finder" system for the creation of random in-game groups, the implementation of the *"Real ID"* social network that links players across the whole catalog of games produced by *Blizzard Entertainment*, and the restructuring of the game's virtual environment as a part of the release of *World of Warcraft*'s most recent expansion, *Cataclysm*.

Second, I examine *Farmville,* as representative of a new class of social computer games. I explore three key pressures exerted on players within *Farmville's* virtual environment: The pressure to collect in-game items, the pressure to connect with other users for in-game rewards, and the pressure to consume both in-game and real world resources. In a similar fashion, I go on to document three in-game mechanics reinforce these pressures: the portability of the game space across several computers and several computing platforms, the intentionally simplicity design of the overall game interface and the large degree of automation of both in-game and out-of-game communication between players.

The research finds that virtual environments do shape their user interactions. I further argue that the virtual consubstantiality formed by the shared experiences created by the design of these virtual environments is integral to the formation and maintenance of each virtual environment's virtual community.

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Dedication

Dedicated in memory of my Mother…

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On February 3, 2010, 25 members of the *World of Warcraft* player guild *Ensidia* recorded the world's first "25-man kill" of the "Lich King" (Ziebart, 2010, February 3). This meant that, in a very crude sense, *Ensidia* was the first group of people to "win" *World of Warcraft*'s second expansion *Wrath of the Lich King* at its most complex and difficult level. This was not *Ensidia*'s first brush with *World of Warcraft* fame. A little over six months earlier *Ensidia* had scored a similarly momentous world's first victory over "Algalon," an in-game encounter that was, at the time, the toughest challenge before the Lich King encounter was added to World of Warcraft's virtual environment (Hecht, 2009, June 3).

Defeating the Lich King was, at the time, the end point within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. The Lich King's defeat also brought the storyline of the *World of Warcraft*: *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion to a close and was the culmination of more than a year of character and group development. The broader generalities of what this accomplishment meant are less important for this project, but two specific pieces of information are worth noting. First, this feat was a significant accomplishment and carried with it a great deal of prestige within greater *World of Warcraft* player community. Second, *Ensidia* recorded their victory by exploiting a technical glitch within the design of the "Lich King"

encounter. Ensidia used in-game items ("Saronite Bombs") in a way that *World of Warcraft's* designers never intended.

Because of this technical exploitation, *Ensidia*'s glory was short lived. On February 4, 2010, *World of Warcraft*'s publisher and the virtual world's administrator *Blizzard Entertainment* put all of the participating members of the *Ensidia* guild on a 72-hour account suspension (Hecht, 2010, February 4). Moreover, *Blizzard* invalidated all of the members' achievements and "confiscated" all of the in-game items that *Ensidia* members had gained as a result of their accomplishment. The members of *Ensidia* received no "trial": there was no discussion regarding to the validity of *Ensidia*'s achievement, no dialogue regarding the fairness of their glitch exploitation, nor any deliberation as to how to best deal with *Ensidia* as a collective group. Instead, *Blizzard*'s system administrators made the decision that *Ensidia* had cheated and, as a result, their achievements, virtual-world rewards, and real-world glory were taken away with a wave of *Blizzard*'s administrator's "magic wand." In response to this ban, one of Ensidia's members ("Muqq") angry declared that "he" was quitting *World of Warcraft*:

> The amount of time and effort we dedicated to get through Wrath of the Lich king and Icecrown to see this guy die and take a turn at Arthas is just sick. To finally see him die only to have the ENTIRE raid banned is simply an insult. It's cheap enough to make a bugged fucking encounter, but to ban people when they do not know what's causing the bugs is just a fucking joke. Whoever came up with this sheer *fisting* of an idea can go fuck themselves. If you spent hours observing us in GM-mode when we beta-test the encounters for you on live, at least make sure you ban us for the right reason. Handing out suspensions when players encounter a portion of the game that is bugged is very short-sighted and insulting. There's been hundreds of thousands of bugs in this game up til now, and

> most people don't get banned, when just playing their game through the bugged content you throw in their face [*sic*]. (“Muqq,” 2010, February 4)

After the *Ensidia* ban, *Blizzard* quickly and quietly patched the “Lich King” encounter to prevent anyone else from exploiting the glitch that *Ensidia* had used in the future. The lesson to be learned from *Blizzard* in this case is clear: “Play *World of Warcraft*, but only do so in ways that we’ve designed.”

The case of *Ensidia*’s “success” and Blizzard’s response provides an interesting snapshot of the dynamics at play in modern virtual worlds. Questions of *Ensidia*’s intent to cheat or the appropriateness of *Blizzard*’s response aside, The *Ensidia* case most clearly demonstrates how the rules of virtual worlds have shifted. Earlier discussions of earlier virtual worlds focused on the various possibilities enabled by these digital environments and their potential to provide users with new experiences that would not be possible offline. However, virtual worlds have not remained as open as these early explorations would suggest. Today, our most common modern virtual environments are decidedly for-profit enterprises. As such, the producers of these virtual environments seek to provide their users with a refined experience.

Rather than the active creators we may have found in earlier virtual worlds, today’s virtual world users have been reframed as consumers of a packaged digital product. Rather than a particular virtual community being the central focus of a virtual world, community has become the by-product of several people sharing a set of experiences. If we wish to understand how rhetoric can function in these kinds of new virtual environments we must keep in mind that

we, as users, have less and less control over some of our modern virtual haunts. Rather than administrators, we are visitors and the real owners are always ready, willing and able to make sure that we remain within our pre-defined roles and areas.

This creates an ongoing tension. While users may be able to discover new and novel ways of interacting within modern virtual worlds, they are ultimately bound by the digital design that undergirds their chosen virtual environments. This design of experience lies at the core of many modern day virtual world experiences. Users' actions and interactions within these spaces are always constrained and shaped by the overarching design logic of these places' developers and producers. This ongoing tension between the design of virtual environments and the rhetorical agency of virtual communities lies at the heart of this dissertation.

The Scale of Modern Virtual Worlds

The internet[1] has changed immensely in the last twenty years. What, in the 1990s, was once a space inhabited primarily by academics and the tech-savvy has today morphed into what can be considered a true mass medium. The internet has continued to change and evolve in step with advances in computing technology. Computers capable of rendering complex 3D graphics are now affordable enough to be purchased by large portions of the global population. With the exponential growth in personal computing power, have come more and

[1] I use the lower-case form of "internet" to reinforce the medium's increasing ubiquity. See Howard & Jones (2004).

more complex digital experiences, all offering increasingly sophisticated graphical environments and increasing levels of digital immersion.

While personal computers continue to become increasingly powerful, the development of internet multimedia technologies like *Java, Adobe Flash* and html 5 make increasingly complex interactive multimedia experiences more accessible to all computer users. These multimedia technologies allow content creators and web designers to build smaller, self-contained digital artifacts, like games and videos, into websites. These web-based technologies have helped to put computer gaming within reach of anyone with an active internet connection and an up-to-date internet browser and essentially turning the basic web browser into a universal multimedia platform.

Computer software developers, like the above-mentioned *Blizzard Entertainment* and *Zynga*, have been quick to capitalize on both of these technological developments. *Blizzard Entertainment* and other game software developers have created several products that use the increase in home-computing power to creating immersive digital environments in the form of massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs). MMOG data tracking website MMOdata.net estimates that there are more than 21 million active MMOG subscriptions around the globe (Van Geel, 2012, February 20). While this number is impressive, modern virtual worlds are far more than just subscription based MMOGs. MMOdata's numbers do not account for the larger of non-subscription based virtual world games. *Zynga,* and other so-called "social game" developers have been quick to capitalize on the other end of the technological

spectrum; creating more accessible games enabled by ubiquitous internet technologies. A report prepared by the Information Solutions Group for the online game publisher *Pop-Cap Games* cites statistics that "Two-thirds or 81 million people play [social games] at least once a day, while 41% or 49 million people play multiple times a day" (Information Solutions Group, 2011).

Virtual world computer games are big business. No two virtual worlds are more emblematic of the financial power of this broad genre of computer-mediated communication than *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille*. As I noted above at *World of Warcraft*'s peak 12 million people worldwide were paying monthly subscriptions to access its digital environment. To put this number into perspective, the global population of World of Warcraft players is almost the size of the entire population of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Those 12 million users pay, on average, $15(US) every month to access this computer game's virtual environment. Assuming that these numbers stayed relatively stable (which they did), *Blizzard* stood to bring in on the order of $2.16 billion in revenue from game subscription fees alone in 2011. *World of Warcraft*'s latest expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* sold a reported 4.7 million software licenses during the month of December 2010 alone, making it the fastest selling computer game of all time (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010, December 13).

Internet "browser game" developer *Zynga* has an equally impressive financial portfolio. In February of 2011, *The Wall Street Journal* estimated that *Zynga* made an estimated $850 million in 2010 and further estimated the three-year-old company itself to be valued between "$7 and $9 billion" (Wingfield, Ante

and Das, 2011, February 14). The above numbers do not include the dozens of other software developers and publishers in this fast-growing sector of the digital economy. While not all publishers will, or even can, be as successful as these two power players, this small snapshot gives some sense of why modern MMOGs are so highly designed and controlled. To lose control of these environments risks the developers of these virtual worlds billions of dollars.

This discussion of the growth of digital gaming as both an industry and as an activity does not mean that all these new gaming environments are just recreational. Digital Gaming has applications far beyond just being a hobby. These non-recreational uses provide another reason for the need to understand these environments and another reason why this study is so important. Castronova (2005) argues that “the synthetic worlds now emerging from the computer game industry, these playgrounds of the imagination, are becoming an important host of ordinary human affairs.” He goes on to note that we “are already beginning to see subtle and not-so-subtle effects on this behavior at the societal level in real Earth countries” (p. 2) further arguing that the “events inside and outside [virtual worlds] cannot be isolated from one another” and “[s]hould more people become involved in practical virtual reality spaces, these external effects will become quite serious on a macro level” (p. 4). Reeves and Read (2009) argue that gaming provides a new business model of “total engagement” that will change “how all of us work” by creating new “information environments that have features borrowed from today’s best games” (p. 4). Beyond potential creating new work environments, Scholars and researcher have long recognized

that computer games have educational and training. Gee (2003) documents the power of video games as an educational medium noting that, considerations of content aside, “what [people] are doing when they are playing video games is often good learning” (p. 199). Similarly, Losh (2009) cites the example of the U.S. military’s software/game *Tactical Iraqi* used to teach soldier basic Iraqi language and social skills and built upon the recreational gamming title *Operation Flashpoint.*

Virtual worlds have become a major part of the world’s modern-day online experience. These digital places have always been rhetorical spaces, necessarily forcing their inhabitants to build and strengthen their virtual communities through communication, persuasion and identification. Virtual World Computer gaming thus represents a growing, and highly rhetorical new medium. Users within these environments are presented with a wide range of previously impossible rhetorical situation and are forced to engage in various kinds of rhetorical behaviors to work toward greater community and collective action. At the same time, computer games are not neutral sites. Users may have some choice in the above mentioned interactions, but many of these choices are hard-coded in the design of each virtual space. Internet and legal scholar Lawrence Lessig (1999) argues that hidden at the heart of any internet experience is the code or digital architecture put in place by the creators and managers of that internet environment (p.6). Laurel (1993) uses theatre as a metaphor for understanding this relationship between computerized systemic control and human agency.

Rather than a simple tool to be used, Laurel formulates computers “as a medium” (p.126). Laurel further arguers that,

> [d]esigners have material forces at their disposal that can indirectly influence the shape of human-computer action. Multisensory representation is the starting point on material causality. The sensory characteristics of representation both suggest and constrain what is possible in a give mimetic context. (p. 140)

Both Laurel and Lessig highlight the often forgotten features of any digital technology: design and code. While users always have some choice, lots of fundamental features of their digital experiences are literally woven into the fabric the computer systems in which those experiences occur.

As this discussion of technology and scale demonstrates, modern games and game-based virtual environments are increasingly complex and far removed from their text-based and user-controlled predecessors. Rather than digital environments built for the sake of being digital environments, many modern MMOGs are virtual environments built with user entertainment and corporate-profits in mind. The exponential growth in the number of virtual world visitors coupled with the blurring of the distinction between virtual worlds and computer games complicates any attempt to understand this very modern phenomenon using older computer-mediated communication theories. While these modern virtual worlds may share some characteristics with earlier virtual worlds like text-based MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) and MOOs (MUD, Object Oriented), they are not the same. Because of their explicit for-profit motivation these virtual environments treat their digital populations differently. While these users may still have some control over how they choose to build their own virtual communities

within these virtual environment, this role is always secondary and within the confines of the primarily game-based design of the virtual environment.

The rest of this chapter lays out the key issues of the project that follows. First, it lays out the research questions for this project and the rationale for this research. Second, it enters into an extended discussion of virtual worlds and draws a needed distinction between the terms “virtual world,” virtual environment,” and “virtual community.” This distinction is important for the following design analysis. Finally, this chapter ends with a preview of the remaining chapters.

Research Questions and Project Rationale

This project investigates critical questions of how rhetoric functions in modern virtual world computer games. In these controlled digital spaces, the design and architecture of virtual worlds exert an often hidden force that pushes virtual world users to interact in certain proscribed ways and act out certain proscribed roles within these spaces. Therefore, an analysis of rhetorical interactions in virtual environments must go beyond what users actually see or do and instead look elements in the underlying design the virtual environment. By combining the situational awareness that comes from the study of rhetoric with a technological understanding, this project hopes to broaden our understanding of how these environments function rhetorically and how the design of digital systems affects those system’s users’ interactions with one another.

Many scholars have studied the rhetoric of "virtuality." For example, Kolko (2006) examines the rhetorical aspects of representation and avatar design within virtual worlds. Similarly, Antonijeviç (2008) examines representations of gesture and non-verbal communication among avatars in *Second Life's* virtual environment. Paul (2010) cites the usefulness of rhetorical theory as a means to understand virtual worlds and calls for scholars to use rhetorical theory to "develop a critical point of view with which to analyze elements of what makes procedures and paratexts meaningful" within virtual worlds (p. 13).

Building on this, and other existing research, this project investigates the ongoing negotiation that modern virtual world users engage in every time they enter their chosen virtual environments. It examines the increasing power that virtual world game producers hold as the parties responsible for creating the digital design beneath all modern virtual environments. This project asks the following overarching research question: <u>What kinds of pressures do modern virtual worlds exert over their users' interactions?</u> As a part of this broader research goal, this research also asks the following two sub-questions:

- What is the architectural context for interaction within these virtual environments?
- How are certain, preferred, communicative interactions digitally engineered into virtual environments?

Understanding these pressures will benefit rhetorical scholars, digital media scholars, and scholars from a variety of related disciplines by showing the subtle ways power can be asserted through digital construction.

Modern virtual worlds range from highly complex and highly immersive massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcaft*, to equally complex but less immersive "social" games like *FarmVille* or *Cityville* on *Facebook*, to academic settings like the virtual classrooms we build using online learning software. While a great deal of academic work has been done to document the novelty and social dynamics of user interactions within virtual worlds, little work has been done to examine the pressures exerted by the digital architecture of these virtual environment within which their users interact.

To answer the above questions, this project examines two emblematic virtual worlds: *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille*. *World of Warcraft* is the largest and most popular MMORPG today. At its peak in early October 2010, a reported 12 million people worldwide were paying a monthly subscription fee to access *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment (Blizzard entertainment, 2010, October 7). MMORPGs, like *World of Warcraft*, fit into the traditional combat-based and conception of computer gaming and require players to invest extensive amounts of time into the game world in order to be successful. In contrast, *FarmVille* is one of the largest examples of the new class of "casual" online computer games. Casual games actively reject long-term and time-intensive player engagement in an attempt to capture a market of so-called "social" or "casual" gamers seemingly left out by the above traditional conception of computer gaming (like MMORPGs). In February 2011, more than 53 million "monthly active users" had linked their *Facebook* accounts to *FarmVille*. A little over one year later, this number only decreased to 29 Million users. *FarmVille* and *World of Warcraft* both remain

popular and emblematic examples. By offering a more informed understanding of the communicative interactions taking place within these opposite extremes, this project will offer insight into the wider body of virtual worlds now being used for not only gaming and other broader social interactions.

This project also provides a corrective to the large body of social-science based virtual world research done up until this point. Rather than focusing on the "newness" and potential openness of virtual world experiences, the end-goal of this research is to gain insight into how users' interactions are actually directed and constrained within the context of virtual world computer games. It also engages so-called "casual" gaming as a serious academic topic; something few other scholars are doing. As such, this project's research is of special relevance to both digital media studies and game studies scholars. The study of rhetoric has been notably absent from the ongoing academic discussion about virtual worlds and this project seeks to remedy this situation. One of rhetoric's key insights is the situational nature of communication. In a virtual world, players' interactions are highly situational and thus rhetoric can help us to understand how these interactions are structured by the digital architecture of that virtual world. At the same time, by understanding this large sub-set of internet communication, we can gain a deeper understanding of the situational nature of online communication and composition more generally. This project will help the greater academic community to understand the complex dynamics at work within these new venues of communication. At the same time, bringing the study of rhetoric's perspective on communication, persuasion, and identification to

interactions within virtual environments opens new spaces for the study of rhetoric by exploring how digital contexts can override other factors in terms of influencing and formulating communication.

The Need for More Scholarship

While the recent increase in scale of virtual world computer gaming that I noted above may bring the issues of virtual world to prominence today, previous research regarding virtual worlds has a long history which dates back to early text-based MUDs and MOOs of the 1990s. Much of the early scholarship focused on the developing potential of these new virtual environments. For example, Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995) and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) explored the potential of new virtual spaces for identity exploration and to provide new means for creating and experiencing narratives respectively. Much of the current-day scholarship regarding virtual worlds continues in the track laid out by these earlier examples. For example, Cecelia Pearce's *Communities of Play* (2009) offers an ethnographic exploration of several "play communities" that encompass both playing alternative roles and engaging in fantasies. Similarly, both Nardi (2010) and Bainbridge (2010) offer anthropological and ethnographic explorations of *World of Warcraft* as a particular virtual community.

Clearly, social scientists have said a great deal about the development of virtual worlds and virtual communities as a social phenomenon; however, there are still gaps in our understanding of these computer-mediated spaces. What

these social-science based approaches fail to appreciate is the powerful role that a virtual world's virtual environment plays in shaping user interactions within that virtual world. In a recent literature review published in the journal *Information, Communication & Society,* Madga David Hercheui (2011) notes that most studies of virtual communities,

> Adopt a descriptive approach of the phenomenon of online interaction, emphasizing more the newness of the phenomenon than the ways in which these collectives repeat the institutionalized social structures […]. Although bringing a rich level of detail, descriptive studies lack the understanding of the whys of online behaviours and how social contexts influence virtual environments. (p. 9)

Scholars may have recognized that we cannot escape our offline selves when we venture online, but less work has been done examining the pressures that the nature of being online has on our online selves.

While there is a great deal of scholarship about what makes life in virtual spaces new and unique, there has been less discussion of the contexts in which inhabitants communicate and how their communication is shaped by their environments. Internet and legal scholar Lawrence Lessig (1999) argues that hidden at the heart of any internet experience is the code or digital architecture put in place by the creators and managers of that internet environment. By combining the situational awareness that comes from the study of rhetoric along with this technological understanding, I hope to broaden our understanding of how these environments function rhetorically and how they shape their users' interactions with one another. As a student of rhetoric and digital media studies, I

find myself in a unique position to examine the question of “the whys of online behaviours” and the influence the architectural context within virtual worlds.

Virtual Worlds: Virtual Communities inhabiting Virtual Environments

In order to give a bit more insight in to the importance of a focus on architecture, this chapter ends with a discussion of virtual worlds, virtual communities and virtual environments. There is a slippage in popular and academic thought about what constitutes a virtual world. This slippage blurs the line between the idea of a “virtual world” and a “virtual community.” However, in my studies of virtual environments, and in my experiences as a participant in these virtual spaces, one thing has become abundantly clear: Virtual worlds are not the same thing as virtual communities. Not keeping this distinction clear closes off a great deal of possible academic work. If we view virtual worlds only in terms of their participants, we lose the potential to view these highly textual environments as texts to be read and understood. Therefore, in the interest of clarity, this section seeks to show a clear delineation between virtual worlds and virtual communities. To do so it offers and then defines three distinct terms: Virtual environments, virtual communities and the broader concept of virtual worlds. Breaking the broader concept down into its constituent parts allows us to better understand how all three of these terms are related and the various pressures exerted on users within these digital spaces.

Virtual environments are the “where” that a person goes when he or she enters a digital space. Put another way, virtual environments are the common

digital ground that a group of virtual world users share and inhabit. When I log in to *World of Warcraft*, I am entering a digital environment (in this particular case one of the many identical server-specific copies of the digital environment of *Azeroth*). Similarly, when I log in to *FarmVille*, I am entering a small section of a larger digital environment (my 16x16 digital plot of land). This "common ground" offers the users of a virtual world a common set of experiences that link the entire group of users together. Virtual environments are not only the digital spaces themselves, but also the set of activities that are common to all users in that environment. For example, the quests that all users complete to advance in World of Warcraft, or the common practice of tilling land, planting crops, and harvesting those crops in *FarmVille*.

Virtual communities are made up of the groups of users that inhabit virtual environments. They are the real-world people that the user "meets" when he or she logs in to a virtual world experience. Virtual communities are certainly an important part of the overall virtual world experience, but they are not the entirety of the experience. For example, when I log in to *World of Warcraft* I am almost immediately greeted by members of my player guild (a codified group of players). I may choose to chat with my guild members and other players that I meet or, at the same time, I may log in under an alias and not interact with any other users at all. In any given virtual environment, there is always (increasingly) plenty to do that doesn't involve interacting with another real person. While I may still see signs of the community around my avatar (other players running around, other players' corpses on the ground, another player killing a monster I need to kill

before I can do so, etc...) my experience may or may not necessarily directly interact with that other player.

Virtual worlds then are made up by the two previous constituent parts: Virtual environments and virtual communities. Either of these two parts can exist on their own, for example a virtual environment without an integrally attached virtual community would be any one of the single-player computer games released every year. Several single-player computer games offer experiences that closely mirror those of modern virtual world computer games, but without a means for enabling players to interact with other players in real-time. Similarly the internet is full of virtual communities that do not have a particular digital location to call their own. A virtual community does not require a virtual space to exist; instead virtual communities necessarily form because of a common interest linking all of the virtual community members together.

The slippage in the distinction between virtual places and virtual communities – the conflating of virtual community and virtual worlds as one entity - is certainly understandable given the rapid development of the internet and the tremendous changes in this medium we still witness today. Early discussions of the internet were rife with spatial metaphors. One went “into cyberspace” or “visited” someone or something “on the web.” Early discussions of internet communities were able to discuss specific nodes of internet traffic and communication as specific and real locations. For example, Gurak’s (1997) discussion of cyber-protests around *Lotus Marketplace* and the Clipper Chip documents a real sense of community among a group of protesters gathering

“around” a listserve. While Gurak’s examples don’t feature a defined internet “place,” they do feature a sense of community coalescing around an internet activity.

Breaking the overarching concept of virtual worlds down into these two parts clears room for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The past 15 years of scholarship have provided us with a great deal of literature examining how people interact in online environments. However, very little has been done to examine the role that digital environments themselves play in the process of online communication. Thus, my experience in these virtual places may, or may not, be tied to the community that I find there.

This distinction matters. While we can all recognize the social pressures exerted on us by our membership in a group/society we are, perhaps, less inclined to see how the environment itself affects our behavior. Modern virtual world producers have the most control over the structure of virtual environments. By making certain activities possible or impossible and by directing players to engage with one another in certain virtual world producers encode certain operation logics into their virtual environments. As the people responsible for building these digital “playgrounds,” they are ultimately responsible for guiding their players.

By showing the distinct difference between virtual environments and virtual communities, we can truly appreciate the multifaceted nature of both of these elements of virtual worlds. When we view virtual communities as not necessarily tied to certain virtual environments, we can then better understand

the vast expanse of each of these internet communities. For example, the virtual community experience of *World of Warcraft* extends far beyond the particular game software. Websites dedicated to *World of Warcraft* like *Wowhead* and *Thothbott*, *Wowpedia* and the official *World of Warcraft* user forums all take on a greater significance. We can understand that these websites are not corollaries to the virtual *World of Warcraft* but an integral part of the overall World of Warcraft experience. These websites become important communal "spaces" where the community of *World of Warcraft* players can "meet" outside of the specific confines of their virtual environment.

We can also see how various related virtual environments interact and pull from the same general virtual community of players. For example: *Zynga*'s constellation of games based around the basic *FarmVille* model. These games all offer their users similar experiences and thus they all pull members from the same larger virtual community base in to several similar virtual environments. Moreover the game space of one *Zynga* virtual environment ties into the game space of others. A large billboard on the outskirts of my *FarmVille* farm tells me to come and visit *Cityville*. By playing *Frontierville*, I can unlock new features that I can place around my farm in *FarmVille*. If we only view virtual worlds as tied to the people in these virtual spaces, then we lose an appreciation for this kind of synergistic design.

Beyond giving us a richer understanding of virtual communities and virtual environments as separate entities, this critical separation also allows us to gain a better appreciation for virtual environments as texts that we as rhetorical scholars

can read. It would be a grave mistake for us as scholars to assume that everything thing that happens within the confines of a given virtual world is due to interactions between users. As commercial enterprises, most modern virtual worlds are created by large multinational software production companies to try to make a profit. Understanding the role that the architecture of a virtual environment plays in shaping the interactions of a virtual community reveals the real power at play in the formation of these virtual places.

Description of the Following Chapters

The rest of this dissertation unfolds in six chapters. Chapter two provides a literature review exploring two larger bodies of digital media research. First it explores the larger concept of “virtual worlds” as it relates to the larger body of internet studies research online life. Second it explores the developing field of game studies and the body on research on computer gaming. The literature reviews situates this dissertation as a crossover point between these two distinct branches of new media studies.

Chapter three builds upon the previous research presented in the literature review and draws upon various rhetorical theories (both classical and modern) to develop an overarching conception of how rhetoric operates in virtual environments. From this overarching concept it develops the idea of “the design of experience.” The second half of chapter three explains the dissertations research methods and lays out the research methodology used in chapters four and five.

Chapter four examines the design of experience within *World of Warcraft*. First, it documents three pressures designed into the games' virtual environment: A focus on gameplay, a focus on performing a specific utility role within the virtual environment, and engaging in goal oriented social interactions. Second, chapter four analyzes three design features that reinforce these pressures: The implementation of the dungeon finder system, the simplification of player specialization and the overall virtual environment, and the implementation of the *Real ID* cross-game social networking system.

Chapter five examines the design of experience within *FarmVille.* As in chapter four it documents three pressures: The collection of in-game items and resources, connecting ones *FarmVille* account to other players' accounts, and the consumption of both in-game and real world resources. Just as before, chapter five then outlines three design features that reinforce these pressures: The overall simplicity of *FarmVille*'s design, the mobility of *FarmVille* as a game environment, and the extensive role that automation plays in simplifying the overall *FarmVille* experience.

Chapter six draws on the analysis of the two previous chapters and concludes the dissertation. It discusses the role that structure and design play enabling and facilitating interactions within these environments. It further goes on to explore the role that internal leadership plays in reinforcing these designed virtual structures and how a concept of virtual consubstantiality develops based on shared experiences within the virtual space. The conclusion formulates this virtual shared substance and a means for understanding virtual community as

arising from shared experience within these virtual environments. The conclusion ends with a brief discussion of what these ideas mean for online education and online interaction more generally.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The study of modern virtual environments lies at the intersection of two different digital media: internet communication and more generalized "virtual environments" and computer games[1]. While in principle these two different digital media seem to be very distinct, the line between them continues to blur. When looking at virtual world computer games like *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille,* it's hard to tell where internet communication between the environment's virtual community ends and where "the game" begins. Part of this blurring no doubt comes from the simple fact that both more generalized internet virtual environments and computer games run on the same kinds of internet infrastructure and computer hardware. However, we must also consider the role that software developers play in this ongoing slippage.

Virtual world computer games are an attractive investment for computer game developers for two main reasons. First, MMORPGs and other online computer games are essentially never-ending games, meaning that they have incredibly long retail shelf lives. While *Ensidia* and other guilds like it may have "won" *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King*, they were quickly presented with a whole new set of challenges in *World of Warcraft*'s next expansion *Cataclysm*.

[1] See Wolf (2001). This term refers to both computer games and what are more popularly called video games.

To understand this longevity, one need only look to one of the earliest MMORPGs *Sony Online Entertainment*'s *Everquest. Everquest* was initially released in 1999, but people continue to play it and its 18 expansions (the latest released in November 2011) today. Second, online games are an attractive investment because they provide social spaces where players can meet, interact, and forge relationships. This social aspect creates strong incentives for players to continue to play and to continue to pay their monthly access fees which can, in turn, increase an online game developer's bottom line.

This technological blurring complicates any attempt to understand modern virtual worlds. Indeed, many of the sources presented in this literature review slip between the terms "game," "virtual world" and "virtual environment," while all describing similar phenomena, further complicating the distinction. While this project works with a very clear separation (as presented in the introduction) between virtual environments, virtual communities and virtual worlds, clearly not every digital media scholar works from this same perspective while labeling various digital phenomena. Because of this often blurry, picture this literature review proceeds in three sections. First, it explores literature on internet communication more generally. Second, it explores computer games as a specific kind of digital communication. Third, and finally, it explores a sampling of the existing academic literature on both *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille*.

To be clear at the outset, I offer the following understanding of these different digital phenomena. At its core, a virtual environment is a fluid and ever-changing experience where users' choices and online interactions with other

users affect the development of that virtual environment's virtual community. More traditional computer games are narrative and ludic texts to be read and played. Computer games present the same story and predefined play choices to all players regardless of other user interactions. Virtual world computer games combine elements from both of these media to present users with a computer game that can be read and played, while also allowing for more direct user to user interaction within the virtual world computer game's virtual environment.

This interaction between narrative, community, and experience is what makes studying modern virtual world computer games and other game-based online environments so complex. In the end, modern virtual world computer games are both a text to read and a community to inhabit. As such, we must understand both virtual environments and computer games if we wish to get a full appreciation of the experience of this new hybrid medium.

Understanding Internet Communication as Virtual Worlds

As noted in the closing sections of the introduction, virtual worlds are composed of both an online (virtual) community and a digital experience (a virtual environment). Virtual worlds gather a group of people together around some common interest or issue, and then use the technology of the personal computer to deliver some common experience to the community as a whole. As Murray (1997) argued, "[t]he most important element the new medium [of virtual environments] adds to our repertoire of representational powers is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as a system of interrelated actions" (p. 274). In an attempt to understand this new "procedural medium," this section of

the literature review considers how virtual community and designed experiences interact in virtual environments.

Community and Virtual Environments

Much of the early scholarship on virtual environments saw them as a development coming out of the larger internet itself and not as separate spaces from the internet. Damer (1998) goes as far as to describe these early "virtual environments" as "cyberspace with a human face" (p. xiv) where users would interact through avatars. His book, *Avatars!*, then goes on to take his readers on a tour through several different early virtual environments. While Damer's "guidebook" seems woefully optimistic and slightly out of date 14 years after the fact, it does provide a sense of the perceived immense potential of these virtual environments.

This sense of digital technology and the internet itself as a new virtual environment lead Murray (1997) to identify "four principle properties, which separately and collectively make [the computer] a powerful vehicle for literary creation. Digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial and encyclopedic" (p. 71). She goes on to note that "[t]he first two properties make up most of what we mean by the vaguely used word *interactive*; the remaining two properties… [make] up much of what we mean when we say cyberspace is *immersive*" (p. 71, emphasis in original). Drawing on Murray's work, Pearce (2009) offers another set of characteristics focused specifically on "virtual worlds" noting that virtual environments are spatial, contiguous, explorable, persistent, populous, inhabitable, and offer embodied persistent identities, consequential

participation, and a sense “worldness” (pp. 18-20). Further drawing on Murray, Pearce argues that “spatiality is the unifying principle tying together these characteristic properties of virtual worlds…. Players in virtual worlds are essentially playing *in* and *with* space, and, in many respects, the space is also playing *with* them (p. 20, emphasis in original).

Whether talking about the internet as a generalized virtual environment or about specific virtual environments, Damer, Murray and Pearce all highlight the important distinction between the “place” of a virtual environment and the community that inhabits that “place.” In the real world, this distinction is less important. Offline communities are based upon social contact, physical location, interaction and shared interests. In contrast, virtual communities are based primarily on a shared set of interests among community members.

Offline communities can form for a variety of reasons and, certainly, a common set of interests among community members is one reason for them to do so. However, the communities of virtual environments are always necessarily formed because of a common interest linking all of the members together. While a virtual space may facilitate the continuance of a given virtual community, the initial social linkages are formed because of a shared common interest. In this way, the community of virtual environments must be more active. As the following two examples show, this active pursuit of common interests may either be serious or recreational, but in either case the formation of community is squarely on the shoulders of each individual user. Virtual environments

functionally require their users to interact in ways that go beyond passive communities.

Gurak (1997) documents the growth of online protest communities that arose in response to both *Lotus Marketplace* and the Clipper chip controversies. Both of these virtual communities used the internet as their group's virtual environments "meeting place." In both of these cases Gurak notes that,

> [T]he privacy-focused cybercommunity appeared to function through a set of common values and goals. Based on the participants' comments and email addresses, it can be concluded that many (though not all) of the participants were computer scientists and other professionals, often with specialized knowledge and tacit understandings about computer privacy. (p. 12)

This leads Gurak to formulate the idea of "group ethos" as a way of understanding the social dynamics of each of these online groups' bodies of internet discourse.

> [I]n the Lotus case this ethos was personal, angry and antagonistic voice; in the Clipper case the group ethos was angry but at times was highly technical as well. In both cases, the group ethos appealed to others of similar persuasion and made it easy to spread the word to the others with similar beliefs. (p. 13)

As Gurak further notes, while many of these protest group participants appeared active in their local communities as well, "it was in cyberspace that these people could talk, make plans, and learn about the topic at hand" (p. 132). In this case, the internet itself became a place for these communities only after they had coalesced around a particular set of common interests and issues.

T. L. Taylor's (2006b) study of *Everquest* reinforces this idea of group ethos through her discussion of the importance of socialization in a more specific virtual environment. She notes that while players may begin playing an

MMORPG like *Everquest* with many different understandings of how the game operates, “because of the multiplayer nature of the game, participants undergo a socialization process and over time learn what it means to play far beyond what the manual or strict rules articulate” (p. 32). Just as the group ethos of an online discussion reinforces and rewards the production of certain kinds of discourse, the socialization within a virtual environment leads to the development of certain kinds of behavior. This socialization affects how users operate within a virtual environment. This behavior is reinforced by the mechanics of the world where certain kind of actions “can in large part only be achieved via the help of others. The reliance on social networks is an intentional aspect of the game design” (p. 38). If users wish to be a part of a virtual community, those users must be active participants. A person may be able to stumble into an offline community by chance of his or her location or connections in the real world, but doing so is difficult, if not impossible in an online setting. A user must actively seek out groups to belong to, and then must take an active role in that group to maintain his or her position within that virtual community.

Design and Experience in Virtual Worlds

Turkle (1995) explored the virtual environments of her day; user-driven and text-based MUDs and MOOs and noted the immense transformative potential of these virtual worlds as a new medium of communication. Ultimately, Turkle suggested that inhabiting a virtual world was a potentially life-altering experience as these virtual environments offered users the promise of digital existences that, unfettered by the material constraints of their physical bodies,

could be used to explore and experiment with their individual identities. Turkle noted that “although [this experimentation] provides us with no easy answers, life online does provide new lenses through which to examine current complexities” (1995, p. 232). Because of this potential for personal insight, Turkle argued “when people adopt an online persona they cross a boundary into highly-charged territory.” And, as a result of exploring this highly charged territory, “Some feel an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation, some a sense of relief. Some sense the possibilities for self-discovery, even self-transformation” (1995, p. 260). While Turkle’s work on identity as mediated by the screen provides us with an entry point into understanding how users interact in and with virtual environments, it is clear that her discussion of early virtual worlds is challenged by the modern diversification of this medium.

While early virtual environments were user-controlled and relatively open, Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) note that, “In the 1990s, free MUDs and MOOs were transmogrified into graphically lavish, technologically sophisticated, commercially profitable games such as *Ultima Online, EverQuest, Asheron’s Call* and *Dark Age of Camelot*.” The rise of for-profit virtual environments meant a change in how virtual environments were coded. “In these virtual domains, corporations really do rule the world: game publishers are at once the creators, owners and governors of such digital realms. Managing an MMO is an exercise in administering ‘life itself’-or at least a ‘second life’ (p. 126). Taylor’s (2006a) study of Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) finds that game designers “are always already working with a model of the user… when they approach the

process of creation." These models circumscribe a MMOG's virtual environment and affect "what is deemed not only legitimate use, but more fundamentally, what identities are sanctioned and inscribed within the artifact." Rather than being in control users then must instead negotiate "with devices and systems, often reinscribing and remaking them" in the process.

While it is easy to interpret attempts at controlling a virtual environment as conspiratorial (especially when done through overly draconian measures), Murray (1997) gives us a different context for understanding the conflict between freedom and control. As she describes it, the change from an open MUD or MOO to controlled MMORPG is not about power, but rather about purpose.

> There is always a trade-off between a world that is more given (more authored from the outside and therefore imbued with the magic of externalized fantasy) and a world that is more improvised (and therefore closer to individual fantasies). The area of immersive enchantment lies in the overlap between these two domains (p. 267).

In this sense, the loss of control is not because of a desire to limit user participation, but rather a preference of experience over community participation. By being mediated by the internet, virtual environments are subjugated to the "laws" of cyberspace. While in the real world you don't do something because you don't want to break a rule, in a virtual world you can't do something because someone decided you shouldn't be able to do so. This kind of implicit programming marks our interactions within virtual environments.

The design affects how we experience identity in these virtual places. Because identity is flexible and changeable in an online setting, virtual environments allow their users to experiment with their identities in ways that

would be impossible offline. Lessig observes that, “In real space much about your identity is revealed whether you want it to be or not. Many of the facts about you, that is, are *automatically asserted* and *self-authenticating*. This is a fact about real-space life” (1999, p. 31). However in virtual spaces, identity is changeable at the whims of the user. When viewed, using Turkle’s words, “as tool, as mirror, and as gateway into a world through the looking glass of the screen” (1995, p. 267), virtual environments provide users with the ability to build virtual lives and inhabit fully-realized virtual places. As such, they seem as though they would be the perfect venue for learning the kinds of critical skills that Turkle wishes more people to develop.

However, internet anonymity is a double-edged sword and system administrators are not the only powers directing the experience of virtual worlds. As Brignall (2008) notes,

> Virtual worlds are not free from real-world stereotypes and prejudices. Stereotypes and cultural identities follow players into the game. Anonymity allows individuals to avoid the negative consequences of being prejudicial to others… In a world where individuals can behave as they choose, and avoid people they dislike, hard-core players often employed tribalisitic techniques to associate only with players they liked. (p. 119)

Just because a user is free from offline identity constraints does not mean that virtual places are entirely free from social structures and stigmas. While individuals are free to explore and experiment with their identities in online spaces, the role of groups in these virtual environments can be just as constraining.

This tension between community and identity is real within virtual environments. In an offline setting, people can only do so much to change their

identity. With the exception of wearing a disguise, people are, for the most part, stuck being themselves. However, in a virtual world, users are freer to construct their digital presence however they see fit. Social signifiers like gender, race, class, or even species, are open to manipulation. Moreover, users can be multiple things at once. While, as has been shown, these digital environments are structured and controlled to a certain extent, they still enable a kind of "identity play" that is impossible outside of a virtual world.

Take for example, the famous case of "Mr. Bungle." In 1993, Jullian Dibble documented the case of "Mr. Bungle" on *LambdaMOO*. When a user, "Mr. Bungle," found a way to exploit the architecture of "his" virtual world, "he" used that knowledge to textually "rape" other users' characters. In response to the "Mr. Bungle" case, the other residents of the *LambdaMOO* began a lengthy discussion about what to do. It was only after a digital debate about the very nature of online life that one of *LambdaMOO*'s administrators "JoeFeedback" quietly deleted "Mr. Bungle." In this case, the act of policing the virtual world was communal and directed by the virtual world's users. As a user-centered medium, *LambdaMOO* users were able to shape their virtual world to their liking and act to change that architecture when the system failed to be responsive to their communal demands (Dibble, 1993).

Just as "Mr. Bungle" exploited the architecture of "his" virtual world for "his" amusement and benefit so too did members of *Ensidia*. However, the members of *Ensidia* received no "trial:" there was no in-world discussion regarding to the validity of *Ensidia*'s achievement of regarding the fairness of

their glitch exploitation. Instead, *Blizzard*'s system administrators made the decision that *Ensida* had cheated and, as a result, their achievements, rewards and glory taken away with a wave of *Blizzard*'s administrator's "magic wand." If we wish to understand how rhetoric can function in these kinds of new virtual environments then we must keep in mind that we have less and less control over some of our modern virtual environments. Rather than administrators, we are visitors and the real owners are always ready, willing and able to make sure that we remain within our pre-defined roles and areas.

While software developers expend a great deal of capital trying to build and perfect the experience of their virtual environments, they are only in control of a certain amount of what happens in these digital spaces. The other part of the system is under the control of the users and is built upon how users interact with one another. While developers are capable of structuring these virtual environments in ways that constrain and control users' actions, there still exist opportunities for unrestricted action. While modern virtual environments may be more controlled, they are clearly not entirely closed off.

Understanding Computer Games

Castronova (2005) notes that, "Games are becoming such an integral part of daily life that the distinction between game and life may be fading as well" (p. 158). Computer gaming has grown from being "kid's stuff" or a nerdy niche hobby into a mass medium and economic force. While virtual environments are marked by the interaction of communities with a digitally mediated experience, computer games can be understood as a combination of a digital experience and a set

narrative. This narrative experience may change slightly depending, in part, on a player's skill level or playing style, but, in the end, there are only a finite number of stories to be told by a computer game. While some computer games may contain multiplayer elements and can be communal activities, my research primarily views computer gaming as a solitary activity. By and large, computer games are like any other mass medium, they allow software developers to sell/transmit a given message to consumers. As the other half of the modern virtual world equation, we need to understand how the narrative elements of computer games interface with their experiential elements before we can begin to understand how community fits into the overall mix.

The debate as to whether we should understand computer games as narratives or as play (ludic) experiences is a defining feature of much Game Studies literature. As a relatively new discipline, Game Studies seems to be trying to figure out where its disciplinary allegiances lie and persuasive claims can be made on both sides of this disagreement. The goal of this section of the literature review is not to rehash this debate. Instead, it takes a brief look at narrative and play so as to ground an eventually mixed "unit operation" based approach as suggested by Ian Bogost's (2006) book *Unit Operations*. Rather than concern itself with strict disciplinary boundaries or claims toward either side of this debate, my work approaches the study of virtual worlds by pulling from both a narrative and ludic understanding of computer games. As will be shown, computer games are both narrative and play, and to ignore one or the other of these functions only provides half the picture.

Computer Games and Narrative

While computer games may be an interactive medium, when the game ends, they all tell their users a particular set story. As such, the narrative is an important part of how we understand the message of computer gaming. Atkins (2003) notes that video games are highly structured and linear, despite any perception of freedom they may give a player. Of his own experience playing video games, Atkins notes that, “Here was a form of fictional freedom: I could tell the story again and again and bring the story to a variety of conclusions. Here was a form of fictional restraint: I could only tell the story in a particular way” (p. 5). Despite the fact that players may be given the chance to change the appearance of characters in a game or may be able to take multiple branches to a game’s final conclusion, in the end, the structure of the game restricts the kinds of representations that can be told.

Atkins’s comments highlight the contradictory nature of computer games as a narrative medium. While there may be many ways to experience a computer game’s narrative, in the end there is only one “right” way that will move the narrative forward. However, this linearity should not be taken to mean that the narratives of computer games are simple. Like any “text,” the player (or “reader”) of a computer game is integral to making its meaning. Dovey & Kennedy (2006) note that,

> Although the meanings generated in games are circumscribed by the magic circle, they nevertheless exist in relation to meanings made in other kinds of semiotic processes…. To read is to create meaning cognitively in the encounter with the text. To play is to generate meaning, to express it though play. (p. 102)

Tavinor (2009) echoes this sentiment and goes as far as to frame computer games as "art," claiming that, "As such [computer games] seem to engage many of the same issues as do the traditional arts, raising questions about aesthetics, representation, narrative emotional engagement, and morality" (p. 13). I, and many of my friends, can personally attest to the fact that some of the most moving narratives we have ever experienced came because we had some form of controller in our hands.

Ensslin (2012) applies a discourse analysis-based framework to gaming and gaming's method for making meaning. After an extended discussion of the narrative language of computer games, she concludes that:

> Computer games surely aren't literary narratives because they have to be played rather than read. Nevertheless, due to the representational qualities of contemporary hypermedia, combinations of game rules with verbal and multimodal fictions and the concomitant, imaginary affordances have encouraged a large number of digital media and game artists and writers to explore the issues of ludic-literary hybridity. (p. 157).

It is clear that computer games tell stories to their players. Even open-ended "sandbox" style computer games, like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, have a tale to tell if players allow themselves to get past the open interface and to move beyond committing digital random acts of violence.

Thus, it is time to move past being distracted by the narrative/game debate. As Journet (2007) asserts:

> Paying attention to the quality of experience in game play, then, means that we need to pay attention to the quality of narrative. In particular, we need to augment debates about whether games are or are not fundamentally (or even primarily) narrative with consideration of the kinds of narrative experiences that games offer (p.114).

It is increasingly unproductive to debate whether or not there is a narrative element to modern computer games, very clearly computer games tell stories. Instead we should turn our attention to how those stories are told and how well computer games tell stories. This deeper appreciation for computer game narratives is of integral importance to understanding computer games as a full-fledged storytelling medium.

This leads us to begin talking about experience in computer games. In the end, the narrative of a computer game comes out through the actions of the player. Nitsche (2008) argues that, “Interactive and narrative elements merge in the actual experience and realization of the interactive event inside the game world. The game space encompasses and situates these elements while the game system narrates them to the player” (p. 65). Similarly, Kryzwinska (2007) observes, “Any game can be said to comprise a set of ‘textual’ features and devices that provide its environmental, stylistic, generic, intertextual, structural and semiotic characteristics. Such formal and formative components combine with the player’s inter-actions to make a coherent game ‘world’” (p.102). This mix of interaction and narrative is integral to computer games’ power as a medium. Attempts to understand games as pure play (ludic) experiences miss this key fact. As Berger (2008) finds,

> Computer and Video games go beyond mere ludic experiences, but include elements of fantasy play, character identification and narrative immersion. Deeper immersion generally makes for a better game. Properly deployed, references to real or fictional worlds within the player’s experience, careful reuse of in-game locations… and a consistent approach to architecture and design all serve to enhance the immersive qualities of a game. (p. 54)

It is in this mix of narrative and play that make computer games a unique media experience.

Computer Games and Experience

While the previous section highlighted computer games' ability to tell stories, this section looks at the way computer games provide ludic play-based experiences to their users. The link between play-experience and computer gaming culture is not at all surprising. In their lengthy documentation of the rise of gamer culture, King and Borland (2003) note repeatedly the linkage between highly experiential paper and pencil role-playing games and early computer games. That role-playing on a virtual stage has risen to prominence today only reinforces the long standing link between these two human endeavors. Wolf (2001) summarizes the experiential nature of game thusly:

> Elements one would expect to find in a game are *conflict* (against an opponent or circumstance), *rules* (determining what can and cannot be done and when), use of some sort of *player ability* (such as skill, strategy or luck), and some kind of *valued outcome* (such as winning vs. losing, or the attaining of the highest score or fastest time for the completion of a task). All of these are usually present in video games in some manner, although to differing degrees. (p. 14).

While these elements are present in all ludic experiences, they achieve new heights in computer games. Wolf further elaborates that, "the video game as a medium includes new elements such as interactivity, collaboration and competition between players and labyrinthine narrative structures, as well as new ways of structuring space, time and narrative" (2001, p. 32). In a similar vein, Murray (2007) notes that more generally, "The new digital medium expands our cognitive powers by offering us new ways of representing the world […] and

greater powers of organizing information…." Specifically, "[i]t is also a medium that is particularly well suited to games, because the user can take on the role of the player. Playing games on the computer is similar to, and different from, pre-digital game playing" (p. 19). It is through the experience of play that these new media elements take on their greater meaning.

At the same time, we must be careful of oversimplifying the nature of play. Carr, Buckingham, Burn & Schott (2006) caution that

> While such definitions and typologies are valuable, considering computer games in these terms by no means wholly explains the nature of gameplay. The experience of play also depends upon how we interpret and use these various elements of the game and how they relate to our own existing enthusiasms and preoccupations. (p. 9)

Moreover, we cannot ignore the role that computer game culture media play in shaping players' experiences with games. For example, as a part of his study of game culture, McAllister (2004) notes that computer game reviews play a large role in shaping gamers' experiences and that, "a considerable part of how games mean as cultural artifacts depends on how agent/reviewers apply a variety of influential forces in the work they do of evaluating titles for agent/consumers." (p. 139).

Miller (2012) documents the overlap of gameplay, performance, and online community with her discussion of performance based music games like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*. She notes that "playing along" in these kinds of games:

> …means accepting some structural constraints and embracing the productive potential of repetition. In this way players can frame a secure space for exploring new modes of experience, often in the supportive company of a community of practice. (p. 226)

Just as we cannot reduce games to pure narrative, neither can we reduce them to pure ludic experience. The ambiguity between narrative and play complicates any attempt to try to assign academic meaning to computer gaming as a whole. As Sicart (2009) argues, this may have everything to do with the ambiguity of the computer game experience itself:

> The distinction between computer games as objects and computer games as experiences is based on an interpretation of the division between Aristotelian potential and actuality: games played are the actuality of the game… but games as designed objects need to be taken into account because the experience of the game is largely dependent on how that game is designed, and how that game is designed (p. 224).

Once more we can see the powerful role of software designers as the shapers of computer game players' experiences. Beyond just telling a story, the way designers structure game experiences shape how the stories unfold.

Virtual World Computer Games: Community, Narrative and Experience

As noted at the start of this literature review, modern virtual world computer games are complicated by being both virtual environments and computer games at the same time. To a certain extent, this creates a contradiction. As Humphreys (2010) argues, "Coded rules in the game are what give it its 'gameness'" and unlike more open virtual environments, "such as *Second Life*, games are structured through rules and constraints which set up very specific forms of challenges and goals. Within these rules, choices made by developers can further encourage particular kinds of sociality" (p. 119). Rather than hastily group virtual world games like *World of Warcraft* or *FarmVille* with other, non-networked, computer games, we must keep in mind the role the

communities that inhabit these virtual environments play in their greater meaning. Rather than consider these virtual environments as only meeting grounds for virtual communities, we must keep in mind the narrative and ludic natures of these computer games and how narrative and play frame the overarching experience.

As has been shown by this literature review, both the operators of virtual environments and the producers of computer games have broad powers to direct and constrain the kinds of action that users can do in and with their products. We must keep this doubly powerful role in mind as we attempt to make sense of virtual world games as a media. We must keep in mind that modern virtual world computer games are designed by game companies from the top down in an effort to make a profit.

Previous research on *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille*

While the previous two sections of this literature review have done their best to examine the multiple facets of the phenomena of virtual world computer games in very broad terms, I will close this chapter with a more finely-focused look at the existing literature on both *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille.*

Previous Research on *World of Warcraft*

Several scholars have interrogated *World of Warcraft* during the 7 years that the game has been online. Perhaps the prime example of *World of Warcraft* scholarship is Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg's edited volume *Digital Culture, Play and Identity* (2008). The volume brings several internet and computer

gaming scholars together for a series of extended observations and discussion of various elements within *World of Warcraft*; covering everything from the encoding of corporate ideology into the game to spatial representations within the game's virtual environment.

For example, Kryzwinska (2008) documents the role that *World of Warcraft*'s ongoing narrative and larger backstory play in creating a rich textual experience for users within the virtual environment. Kryzwinska argues that:

> Through a web of intertextual and intratextual signifiers, the game invites players to read the world and gameplay tasks as myth, and like myth these have allegorical and material dimensions. (p. 138)

Turning from narrative to play, Walker Rettberg (2008) examines the central gameplay mechanic of completing quests for rewards and experience within *World of Warcraft* and argues that the deferral of rewards and repetition of similar gameplay behaviors are the "primary rhetorical figures" upon which the game's symbolic world is built (p. 182). MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler (2008) most closely analyze styles of play and designed experience in their study of the tensions between digital gameplay and the kind of offline roleplaying outlined by King and Borland earlier in this literature review. The two conclude that actions like a player's choice to focus on roleplaying within the game world and the use of software "add-ons" to modify the in-game experience,

> Express the needs that players have to insert themselves into the game more and increase the agency available in MMORPGs. This agency is something that does not yet exist fully in the *World of Warcraft*, but role players' attempts to overcome this show clearly that, in the future, it may well be possible. (p. 244)

These examples give some sense of the multiplicity of issues at play in trying to study *World of Warcraft.*

Several social scientists have also taken a turn at understanding the complex social dynamics within *World of Warcraft's* digital environment. Bainbridge (2010) engages in a lengthy, if somewhat scattered, participant observation-based exploration of "the entire territory" of *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment (p. 15). Bainbridge settles on documenting the narrative and fictional back-story of the game as a means for understanding the digital culture within the virtual environment. Similarly, Nardi (2010) engages in an extended ethnographic investigation of *World of Warcraft*. Based on her own ethnographic reportage Nardi argues that performance is the best way to understand this new digital medium:

> Video games such as *WoW* are a *new visual-performative medium* enabled, and strongly shaped, by the capacities of digital technology, in particular the execution of digital rules powerful enough to call forth complex worlds of activity. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

Building off of this point, Nardi later suggests that, "Participation in virtual worlds is not simulation but performance. There is no faking performance; it is brutally honest. The software enforcing the rules and the players watching to see if you click the cube at the right moment compel honesty" (p. 93).

Chen (2012) presents a similar long-term ethnographic self-reflection of his experiences within *World of Warcraft* and notes, amongst several things, the central role that player "expertise" has in defining social interactions within of *World of Warcraft* (p. 48). Chen goes on to highlight the centrality of play when he argues that the tools that have developed to support player guilds "are still

about progression and competition. There is no easy way to track for example, guild attrition, happiness, or strength of social relationships" (p. 170). This focus on play over everything else eventually led Chen to disengage from *World of Warcraft*. When Chen eventually quit his player guild, "it was not because [he] was tired of the guild, but more that [he] was tired of what it meant to play" (p. 171). Paul and Philpott (2011) examine the arc of the *World of Warcraft* player guild *Cardboard Tube Samurai* as an example of Kenneth Burke's concept of identification in action. They note a "textbook" example of Burkean identification is central to the play of online games as:

> Through the actions and practice of raiding, groups in *WoW* are able to overcome the divisions that threaten to pull them apart. Through a process of identification players connect with each other and become 'substantially one' with players other than themselves. (p 189)

Paul and Philpott go on to document how an increased focus on raiding ultimately harmed the overarching identifications that helped to keep the guild together and ultimately led to the group's breakdown. They observe that, "As environmental factors started to impact the guild and fewer people were available, the guild suffered an identity crisis" (p. 196).

Continuing on the topic of play, Brown (2011) documents the development of various "endgame" options on *World of Warcraft* as a means of keeping players engaged. While the *Ensidia* example cited in the introduction, and both of the previously cited studies, place a premium of raiding as the endgame content, Brown documents several other possible endgame options like unlockable quests, easier raiding options and player vs. player (PvP) combat (pp. 85-88).

Previous Research on *FarmVille*

While the popular press has been quick to offer initial considerations of the economics of the social gaming model and the vast economic potential of this new genre of games (as cited in the introduction), few scholars have yet to examine *FarmVille* and other games like it. Anecdotally this seems to stem from the fact that at a surface level *FarmVille* and other social games seem to be less complex. While *World of Warcraft*'s perceived complexity has been a beacon to scholars, the relative simplicity of *FarmVille's* virtual environment has seemingly led scholars to give less consideration to a seemingly simple game.

FarmVille arises as a part of the crop of so-called "casual games" that are currently on the market. Juul's (2010) study of casual gaming attributes the rise of these casual games to a "perfect storm of combining factors" including: Changing demographics, the "widespread presence of personal computers in the industrialized world," and changing economics of game software development (pp 147-48). As Juul suggests in his conclusion, "over the last several years we have learned to create video games that reach a broad audience. Not that everybody is playing videogames yet, but there is nothing that prevents this from happening" (p. 152). While more traditional computer games continue to be published and played, the rise of this new genre of online game environments needs to be examined as well.

Those scholars that have examined *FarmVille* most often highlight the social nature of the game and the important role that online social networking plays in the game's mechanics. For example, Mäyrä (2011) examines *FarmVille*

and other farming simulation like it, and cites “a sense of achievement and sociability [that] come together in this kind of virtual farm-building and caring simulation, where it is possible to help one’s *Facebook* friends to take care of their virtual plants and animals” (p. 119). Similarly, Murray (2012) notes the role that sustained casual gaming plays in larger social media-based environments. She observes that the success of *FarmVille* in particular was “surprising to veteran game designers because the mechanics seemed so trivial, and the game so unchallenging” (p.388). Murray goes on to argue that instead of a complex designed experience,

> [t]he fun of games like *FarmVille* comes from the low level of coordination and skill needed to achieve a shared play experience with people who are drawn from an already meaningful network of ‘friends.’ Young children learn to play together through ‘parallel play’ experiences, sitting beside one another, aware of one another’s presence, without directly interacting. Games like *FarmVille* can be seen as parallel play experiences for large virtual communities. (pp 388-89)

The importance of this link between online social networking and social gaming cannot be overlooked. Social games like *FarmVille* provide users with a means of continuing and furthering their online and real-world relationships within a virtual space. Rather than a separate space apart from daily life, virtual world computer games are woven into their users’ day-to-day experiences.

Taking all of this early literature into consideration, it becomes clear that more work needs to be done and that there are still avenues to be explored in both of these digital environments. Taking the existing literature on *World of Warcraft* into consideration, it becomes clear that *World of Warcraft* is an incredibly rich and complex text. While much has been done to understand the

game's virtual environment through other perspectives, rhetoric has only begun to investigate *World of Warcraft* as a dynamic rhetorical space. In the case of *World of Warcraft,* this project adds a rhetorical perspective to an already rich and ongoing academic discussion.

In the case of *FarmVille,* this project makes inroads to understanding the rhetorical pressures exerted by a new and seeming overlooked digital environment. As more and more users engage with these kinds of casual and social games, understanding how these seemingly simple virtual environments operate will become more and more important. By analyzing these iconic and emblematic examples we can get a better understanding of the broader dynamics at play in virtual world computer games as a medium.

Chapter 3: Theory and Method

As the story of *Ensidia*'s banning from *World of Warcraft* illustrates, a virtual environment's underlying design plays an important role in shaping (and in some cases limiting) the uses that players can make of that virtual environment. Understanding the role that this often hidden design plays in shaping user interactions is the central goal of this research. To that end, this chapter lays out the major theoretical and methodological assumptions that guide this examination into the pressures on play and the power of virtual environment design.

This chapter proceeds in two sections. The first section lays out the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The first part of this section draws upon the rhetorical theories of Aristotle, Kenneth Burke, and Ian Bogost to build an understanding of how rhetoric functions both contextually and communally. It then moves on to examine newer understandings of how rhetoric functions in digital spaces. The second part of this section builds upon this initial exploration of rhetoric and digital media by drawing upon media theorist Marshall McLuhan and digital media researchers like, Lawrence Lessig, and Laura Gurak. These theories are used to develop an understanding of digital environments and internet-mediated communication in a more general sense.

From both of these theoretical considerations, I develop an understanding of rhetoric that is both contextual and communal and an understanding of digital technology that is both potentially enabling and constraining. These rhetorical and technological frameworks for are important for understanding the importance that the design of experience plays in virtual environments. By understanding virtual worlds as both rhetorical and technological spaces, we can develop a theory of virtual world communication emphasizing the contextual and communal nature of online life.

The second section of this chapter lays out the methodology for the analysis offered in the next two chapters. First, it uses the preceding theoretical framework to explain and rationalizes my choice to engage in an extended participant observation-based examination of both *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille*. Second, it explains my choice of both *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille* as research sites. Third, it details my data collection methods within each virtual environment. Finally, it discusses the role that the researcher plays in participant observation-based research.

Theoretical Framework

Using virtual environments puts users into a specifically bounded and clearly defined communicative context. The study of rhetoric offers scholar a clear set of tools to understand the importance and implications of context as a formative force affecting communication.

Rhetorical Theory: Context and Community

The study of rhetoric is, at its core, the study of communication and interaction within a greater social context. Rhetorical actions are always situated within the greater social realities of those seeking to communicate. Even the earliest formulation of rhetorical theory focuses our attention on the contextual nature of rhetoric. In Book 1, Chapter 2 of *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle clearly defines rhetoric:

> Let rhetoric [be defined] as an ability, in each [particular] case to see the available means of persuasion. (1991, p. 36)

From this point of departure Aristotle goes on to lay out his techniques for achieving persuasion in various, particular, cases. However, at the core of Aristotle's concept of rhetoric remains this key observation of persuasion always occurring in a particular context.

More modern rhetorical theories further develop this focus on the importance of context. Burke's theories of identification and the appeal of "form" are particularly illustrative in understanding the importance of context for rhetoric. In Burke's formulation of rhetoric, rhetorical context is not only an understanding of where and when rhetoric happens, but rather it develops into a powerful tool that rhetoricians can draw upon. In *Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke explains the basis for his concept of identification:

> A is not identical to his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is

> both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (1950, pp. 20-21)

At the core of Burkean identification lies the concept of "consubstantiality" or the sharing of motivations and "substance": "To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (1950, p. 21). Under such a theory of rhetoric, context is transformed from just some situation which a rhetor must navigate, to instead become the most important consideration and the central element that a rhetor must address.

> As for the relation between 'identification' and 'persuasion': we might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience (1950, p. 46).

This idea of sharing substance also links in to Burke's earlier works on the appeal of style/form as a means for creating a connection between a rhetor and his or her audience.

In explaining the appeal of form in *Counter-Statement*, Burke argues that while there may be certain universal experiences we all share, we all also have our own individual patterns of experience. Rhetoric overcomes these differences through the use of symbolic language as "The symbol is the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience" (p. 152) and the appeal of the symbol "is perhaps most overwhelming in its effect when the artist's and the reader's patterns of experience closely coincide" (p. 153). By sharing symbols, we create commonality and move toward greater identification. In virtual worlds, the shared experience of inhabiting a given virtual environment provides a baseline level of

identification among all users. It supplies each player with a common set of experiences and a set of collective goals/motivations upon which to draw.

Yet, as Burke observes, there is no possible perfect connection between rhetors and audiences because,

> Perfection could exist only if the entire range of the reader's and the writer's experience were identical down to the last detail. Universal and permanent perfection could exist only if the entire range of experiences were identical for all men forever. (1931, p. 179)

Similar experiences give us the first step toward the creation of consubstantiality, but beyond these experiences, we must rely on the use of symbolic language and rhetoric to create identification and bridge the gap between rhetor and audience.

As Kaufer and Butler (2000) argue the symbolic nature of rhetorical and representational composition has a central role in the creation of virtual realties within the texts of composers. While they note that while virtual reality "is a buzzword of the computer generation" the project of creating reality with language "was undertaken thousands of years ago with the development of our ability to tell stories. (p. 9). The two go on to argue that,

> Narrative language, whether spoke or written is also a form of virtual world design. Narrative brings a listener or reader into worlds the he didn't previously know. Functional discourse, whether spoken or written, is also a form of virtual world interaction, offering readers various invitations into textual worlds based on purposes to learn, do, or decide. (ibid)

This observation brings to mind the central role that composers, designers, and developers have in creating the experience of a virtual environment. As they further argue, in oral and written interactions "we are able to bring complex, dynamic worlds to listeners and readers (p. 10). Such an understanding not only

elevates rhetoric and composition to new cultural preeminence, but also reinforces rhetoric's ability to understand the creation of "interactive" contexts.

Thus, turning our attention to digital and interactive virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille*, we see both form and identification at work within each designed virtual environment. All users of a virtual space share one key unifying characteristic; they are users of their shared virtual space. As such, there is always a certain level of underlying *virtual consubstantiality* at play in all virtual environments. For example, while I may log in to *World of Warcraft* to "run dungeons" and another person may log on to gather virtual materials and trade those materials with other players, we are both already linked by our connection as *World of Warcraft* players. The same could also be said of a group of *FarmVille* neighbors. Similarly, the narrative of a given virtual space, whether that narrative is imposed from above by a game developer or created through the ongoing interaction of groups within that space, also provides a set of common experiences that digital rhetors within these virtual worlds can drawn upon in making appeals to their virtual communities.

This sense of "virtual consubstantiality" permeates digital environments. While the users of a virtual world may have drastically different motives for their play, they are all linked by the very act of being in a virtual space. While all virtual world users share certain universal experiences, they are also apart from one another and subject to their own internal motivations. As Burke notes, while language enables communication and identification it also creates division. While, "In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no

strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only through a mediatory ground that makes the communication possible" (1962, p. 25). Burke's concept of form creates a certain amount of common ground upon which rhetors can rely, but at the same time we all have our own internal and individual motives. Collective action requires that we work together and so we must also use symbolic language to overcome the inherent conflict created by our differing motivations.

As a part of her discussion of "digital rhetoric," Losh (2009) states:

> Many who purportedly study the rhetoric of digital discourse focus almost exclusively on the technological apparatus, so that a conventional view of the subject directs attention to the mechanical responses of the computer to input rather than the theories behind the design and continuing evolution of digital media and networked systems. (p. 47)

Losh also observes that specialists "too rarely consider the epistemological implications of contemporary information science for networked, digital communication, which may operate with some fundamentally different assumptions about systems of signification than do natural language models" (p. 47). While the previous examples have focused on communication in more traditional textual contexts, we cannot overlook the new modes of interaction enabled by digital technologies. Communication events in digital media environments like virtual worlds can't be fully understood through as purely textual, we must also account for the digital systems in which our interactions occur. To that end, we can draw upon the work of game studies scholars to offer a new way of approaching persuasion in digital systems. Ian Bogost offers what he labels as "procedural rhetoric," or "the practice of persuading through

processes in general and computational processes in particular…" (2007, p. 3). As Bogost further explains, rather than focusing on overt arguments, "[p]rocedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (*ibid*). As such, it provides a powerful tool for understanding the rhetoric of digital systems.

Bogost elaborates that in many ways, this new approach to understanding rhetoric samples from both the classical and modern traditions: "following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinions or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively." But rather, "its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models" (Bogost, 2007, p. 29). As an example of the tension between openness and a controlled system, Bogost examines the often-made claim that more open-ended "sandbox" style games like *Grand Theft Auto III* let players "do anything"

> The 'parameters of the game' are made up of the processes it supports and excludes. For example, entering and exiting vehicles is afforded in *GTAIII*, but conversing with passerby[s] is not…. This is not a limitation of the game, but rather the very way it becomes procedurally expressive. (2007, p. 43).

The system itself imposes limitations on players and directs their actions by the kinds of allowed in-game behaviors that are coded into the system. In the end, Bogost argues that,

> Processes influence us. They seed changes in our attitudes, which in turn, and over time, change our culture… video games are not

> expressions of the machine, they are expression of being human. And the logic that drives our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want to become. (p. 340)

Thus, even if we are not the targets of overt rhetorical claims, we can still be persuaded by the ways in which the rhetorical nature of a digital environment guides our actions with a hidden hand. Understanding these subtler ways of persuasion requires us to look to new methods of persuasion and requires us to step outside of rhetoric's classic textual/oral framework.

Digital Media Theory: Potential and Control

The idea that a system's design is integral to understanding how virtual environments function is a common thread in the study of virtual spaces. For example, in her study of the MMORPG *Everquest,* T.L. Taylor notes that "it is possible to identify specific mechanisms within the structure of the game that facilitate various forms of social interaction and interdependence" (2006b, p. 38). As noted in the introduction, all virtual worlds are essentially mediated by their status as an internet-based technology. This technological mediation guides and constrains the kinds of things that the inhabitants of a virtual environment can and cannot do. In the introduction to *Understating Media*, media theorist Marshal McLuhan famously states:

> The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is of an extensions of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by any new technology. (1964, p. 7)

While the first part of this observation has been quoted by many to the point of becoming a cliché, McLuhan's observation still remains valuable to current digital

media scholars as it illustrates the powerful transformative effects that new technologies can have. Rather than specific questions of content or use, we must look at the role that a technology itself plays in the formation and structuration of human interactions.

McLuhan cautions us that "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action…. It is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (1964, p. 9). As an example of this, McLuhan offers up the ubiquitous medium of the "electric light":

> The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no 'content.' And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. It is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium (*ibid*).

Just as we cannot overlook the immense transformative power of the light bulb on daily life, we cannot overlook the design that functions "behind the scenes" of any given communication environment. We must be mindful of the role that this design plays in shaping the way in which users interact with their virtual environs and communicate with one another.

As McLuhan (with Fiore) would later argue, the effects of this kind of mediation are widespread and diffuse, affecting all parts of human interaction, beyond just the easily recognizable immediate effect:

> All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in the personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments. (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 26)

This conception of the media as a pervasive, easily overlooked, and all-changing thing leads McLuhan to caution other media scholars to look beyond the obvious to the often hidden effects of any new medium. As McLuhan and Fiore further argue, “environments are invisible. Their groundrules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception” (pp. 84-85). This understanding of how a medium can “work us over” is important for understanding the role that the design of a virtual environment plays in shaping the interactions of that environment’s users.

Winner (1977) examines the idea of seemingly autonomous technology and suggests that this sense of the media “working over” users can be traced back to the “technological politics” that results from technology’s increasingly centralized role in human culture. For Winner, technological politics,

> [E]ncompasses the whole of technology’s capacity to transform, order, and adapt animate and inanimate objects to accord with purely technical structures and processes. It is the system of order and governance appropriate to a universe made artificial. (p. 237)

Thus, McLuhan’s suggestion that the media have a kind of social and cultural autonomy can be understood as arising out of the operational imperatives of new technological systems. These imperatives create a situation where:

> The systems themselves are anything but responsive and flexible. Their conditions of size, complexity, and mutual interdependence give them a rigidity and inertia difficult to overcome. Rather than respond to commands generated by political and social processes, such systems produce demands society must fulfill or face unfortunate consequences. (p. 251)

Winner goes on to note that this perceived technological autonomy is only compounded by the fact that in a “members of the technological society, actually know less and less about the fundamental structures and processes sustaining

them (p. 295). Instead “most persons are caught between the narrowness of their everyday concerns and a bedazzlement at the works of civilization” (p. 296).

Pacey (1983) argues in similar vein with his examination of culture, technology, and technological practice (p. 5). For Pacey, the blurring of the boundary between the organizational, technical, and cultural aspects of technologies hinders our ability to consider the greater social and cultural impact of technologies leading to “a tangle of unexamined beliefs, and values, and a basic confusion about what technology is for” (p. 8). For Pacey, “the most fundamental choices in technology… are choices between attitudes in mind.” (p. 169). He goes on to articulate that we, as users, “may cultivate an explanatory, open view of the world, or we may maintain a fixed, inflexible outlook, tied to the conventional wisdom, in which new options are not recognized” (*ibid*). Chandler (1995) furthers this point on technology’s relation to culture when he observes that,

> Technology is one of a number of mediating factors in human behaviour and social change, which both acts on and is acted on by other phenomena. Being critical of technological determinism is not to discount the importance of the fact that the technical features of different communication technologies facilitate different kinds of use, though the potential applications of technologies are not necessarily realized.

Winner, Pacey, and Chandler complicate our relationship with technology and show us, as users, that we must be aware and critical of the processes of control that run beneath the surface of these virtual environments.

The design of digital environments can play an active, if hidden, role in shaping the rhetorical actions of their users and we must keep these potentially broad effects in mind when studying these digital spaces. These encoded laws

change the ways in which users interact within a virtual environment. The debate over how we structure the internet is certainly not new. In 1996, Beaubien called upon the burgeoning community of internet users to "deal self-consciously with questions about the power of programming and the involving, often bewildering nature of computer-mediated communication. This will require some attempt from each 'cybercommunity,' and from society at large to define a set of common values and priorities." He asks, "Will it be the prescriptions of government, the motives of business, or the collective actions of the community of participants that determine the dominant institutions of cyberspace?" (1996, p. 188).

As if to answer this rhetorical question, Lessig (1999) notes the incredible power of internet architecture to shape users' online behavior. As he bluntly notes regarding this control, "Architecture is a kind of law: it determines what people can and cannot do." In Lessig's view, the rise of commercial interests on the internet has led to the creation of "a kind of privatized law" that benefits those with a financial stake in the developmental trajectory of internet. For Lessig, it becomes clear that "public values are not exhausted by the sum of what IBM might desire" and "what is good for *America Online* is not necessarily good for America" (p. 59). As Lessig continues, "the margins matter. The values of a given space are not only the values of speech, autonomy, access or privacy. They may also be values of limited control" (p. 108). The values that a network architect seeks to promote ultimately become encoded into the structure and guiding logics that direct and shape how users can operate online. These logics necessarily limit what people can and cannot do in a virtual environment.

Lessig's observations as to the power of code give us, as rhetorical scholars, an opportunity to look at the interplay of power dynamics in a bounded rhetorical context:

> In real space we recognize how laws regulate—through constitutions, statutes and other legal codes. In cyberspace we must recognize how code regulates—how the software and hardware that make cyberspace what it is *regulate* cyberspace as it is. (p. 6)

Because of this regulation, we are left with a case where "there is no middle ground. There is no choice that does not include some kinds of *building*. Code is never found; it is only ever made, and only ever made by us" (p.6). This offline "architecture" is made explicit in the digital architecture used to build the experience of virtual worlds. As Lessig (1999) argues "some architectures of cyberspace are more regulable than others. Thus, whether a part of cyberspace—or cyberspace generally—can be regulated turns on the nature of its code. Its architecture will affect whether behavior can be controlled" (p. 20). Lessig further argues that,

> Cyberspace is not a place, it is many places. Its places don't have one nature, they have many different 'natures.' These natures are not given, they are made. They are set (in part at least) by the architectures that constitute these different spaces. (p. 82)

By highlighting the roles that internet architecture and design play in shaping user interactions within Lessig equips scholars with tools we can use to understand the designed experience specific virtual environments within the broader body of internet communication.

In a completely open digital system, where each user was bound only by his or her own personal motives, rhetorical exchanges would be unlimited,

unhindered, and, at the same time, impossible. Digital architecture and design are the forces that enables online communication by providing the basis for meaningful interactions. Architecture and design impose order on the messy digital cacophony of online life. However, at the same time that they enable meaningful exchanges, these two forces also determine and shape our interactions. Understanding the specific negotiations between the needs and desires of a virtual environment's users and the design experience implemented by a virtual environment's creators and administrators allows us to better understand rhetorical practice and performance in digital spaces more generally. By understanding the design of experience at work in *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille* this project hopes to shed light on the nature of the internet today.

As part of her study of rhetoric and digital technology, Gurak (2001) argues:

> What we need is a new literacy, a critical literacy, for this new medium…. To become cyberliterate, people need to… also to become more sophisticated about critiquing, challenging, and anticipating how these technologies are designed, implemented and used. (p. 11)

For Gurak, this new cyberliteracy involves "…a *conscious* interaction with the new technologies: one that embraces and enjoys the technology but at the same time is critical" (p. 12). Both McLuhan and Lessig give us a set of lenses we can use to examine the power of technology in human life. Both scholars call upon us to critically engage with our chosen technologies. While McLuhan views these changes as stemming from the nature of the technology itself, Lessig warns us to consider the power wielded by those in charge of digital systems. With this

critical theoretical framework in place, this chapter now moves on to discuss the specific methodological choices that arise from this framework.

Research Design and Methodology

Approach and Rationale

As stated in the introduction, this project examines both *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille* as emblematic, and drastically different, examples of virtual world computer games. In each case, it observes and analyzes the ways in which each virtual world's digital design works to shape and lead users in certain preferred behaviors. To understand each of these virtual environments, I engaged in a long-term participant observation study of each virtual world computer game. Participant observation is a powerful tool for conducting qualitative research. Marshall and Rossman (2006) note that the immersive nature of participant observation "permits the research to hear, to see, and to begin to experience reality as the participants do" (p. 100). Rather than acting as a detached clinical observer, participant observation "offers the researcher the opportunity to learn directly from his own experience" while in the research site (p. 100). In describing the benefits of carrying out this kind of qualitative research on the internet and other digital media sites, Sudweeks and Simoff (1999) state simply that "the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to understand observed phenomena" (p. 35). In working toward this deeper understanding, "the *role* of the investigator is *participatory* and personal" (p. 36). The value of this approach is that rather than divorcing the research data from its context, "qualitative research advocates actively interpreting phenomena through the observation period" (p. 36). Stake

(1995) cautions researchers that "participant observers do not generate deeper, more compassionate meanings than passive observers, but one role may work much better for certain people, certain situations (p. 104). In this case, qualitative participant observation is most beneficial due to the nature of these environments as both textual and interactive spaces. Hine (2000) cautions researchers that to view online environments and interactions as only texts misses several key elements that make this medium unique. "The Internet can be seen as textual twice over: as a discursively performed culture and as a cultural artefact [*sic*], the technology text. In neither sense are its uses and interpretations determined by the text" (p. 39). Interactive media's dual role as both a text and as a context necessitates this kind of participatory research.

In a similar vein, Jones (1999) cautions internet researchers in his introduction to *Doing Internet Research* that,

> "it is critically important that we do not transfer the experiential demands that [existing methodological tools] make (in regard to language, meaning, epistemology) to the realm of the Internet, lest we confine experience to that which *we* know but that others either may not know or, importantly, that which they experience as new or experience in ways that we have not. (P.9 emphasis in original)

By acting as an engaged participant within both of these virtual worlds, this project takes up Jones' call to internet researchers to "not only to study the Internet as an entity unto itself but, rather, to study it within the context of the particular combination of late 20th-century history and projections of 21st-century existence" (Jones, 1999, p. 23). With this perspective in mind, this project adopts what Sterne (1999) labels a "hybrid approach" to online research:

> On-line analyses of Internet culture use a hybrid approach—often combining, in various degrees, ethnography, autobiography and textual analysis. Often there is to explain the working of on-line culture in an ethnographic or discourse-analysis style. (p. 269)

In each research setting, I set out to participate within the designed experience of each virtual environment. I observed the effects of that designed environment, examined, read, and analyzed "textual" and the "material" artifacts of each of these virtual spaces and dealt with the designed experience as a member of each virtual world's virtual community. As both a participant and as a rhetorician, I found myself in a powerful position to be able to understand these different virtual worlds at a deeper level based on my position as an engaged researcher.

Research Site Selection

My selection of *World of Warcraft* and *FarmVille* as research sites was both strategic and illustrative of the opposite ends of the current computer gaming spectrum. At the start of this project, there were any number of newer MMORPGs that I could have selected for this study other than *World of Warcraft*. However, *World of Warcraft* was then, and still is now, the biggest MMORPG on the market. In fact, several of the other, newer MMORPGS that I could have chosen only went on to see their market shares spike and then quickly diminish, while *World of Warcraft* has maintained a much higher level of monthly subscriptions and a greater level of subscription growth over the long-term. In the end, I chose *World of Warcraft* because the design of its virtual environment represents the prototypical MMORPG (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *World of Warcraft*'s MMORPG user interface.

World of Warcraft's play model encourages users to invest long periods of time into the game's virtual environment and a great deal of energy and interest toward the pursuit of progress within the game.

FarmVille, on the other hand, represents something very different. The relatively simplistic play mechanics, friendly graphics, and easy integration with its users' *Facebook* user interfaces all add up to create an easily accessible virtual environment and the prototypical social game. In many ways, *FarmVille* was chosen as a counterpoint to *World of Warcraft*; an equally popular game with a decidedly different play mechanic. At the time that I started this research project, *FarmVille* was the biggest social media game on the internet. As time and the project progressed, its number of active monthly users steadily decreased, but this is only because of new social gaming options being offered based upon the *FarmVille* model of gaming. *FarmVille* publisher *Zynga* has since

gone on to release several newer games all based upon the basic *FarmVille* model including *Frontierville* (now rebranded as *The Pioneer Trail*), *Cityville*, and *Castleville*. These games all make subtle changes to the basic *FarmVille* formula, but the core mechanics of social media-based gameplay and *Facebook* integration remain the same. As such, *FarmVille* represents the prototypical social game.

Collection of Data

Collecting Data in *World of Warcraft*

The data and experiences that form chapter four were collected during a span of more than 2 years of time spent playing and interacting with *World of Warcraft*. The research period began in May 2009 when I reactivated my preexisting *World of Warcraft* account. This account was initially created for an earlier, unrelated study of questions of roleplaying, identity play, and identity representation in *World of Warcraft*. The active period of observation ended June 2011, just before the release of patch 4.2.0 (*The Rage of the Firelands)*. The window overlapped with the release of the final content for *World of Warcraft*'s second expansion (*The Wrath of the Lich King*) and the release of the game's third expansion (*Cataclysm*).

All of my experiences for this project came from the *Terenas*-US server (or "realm"), a research site I originally chose based on a suggestion from a former student. *Terenas-US* is a "normal" realm. As the name would suggest, this is the most common server structure, giving its inhabitants the option to engage in player vs. player (PvP) combat, but not forcing users to do so. At the same time,

Terenas-US did not enforce any kind of role-playing restrictions, meaning that users were largely free to interact with one another as they saw fit. In an attempt to distance myself from my previous in-game friendship and associations, I chose to create an entirely new set of characters on the "Horde" side of *Terenas-US*, separate from the three pre-existing "Alliance" characters created during my initial three-month subscription. I intentionally tried to create distance from my previous experiences with the intention of trying to maintain some level of clinical detachment; but, in the end, I found myself just as engaged on the other side of the server as before.

During my two years in *World of Warcraft*, my main character (or more simply my "main") was "Bradruk," a Tauren Druid (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Bradruk, my "main" character.

I chose this character based upon my own aesthetic perceptions (he looked big and menacing) and the fact that within the designed experience of *World of*

Warcraft druids can play any role within a group. I began playing as "Bradruk" the day that I reactivated my account and continued to play as him up through the day I walked away from the research site. In addition to Bradruk, I also amassed a large array of alternate supporting characters (or "alts") to act in support of Bradruk's adventures in *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. While several of these alts came and went as they outlived their usefulness, Bradruk remained my constant digital persona. He became my virtual self within this virtual world, so much so that I eventually deleted all of the original Alliance characters that I had previously created and have since recycled their names into new alts for Bradruk.

Collecting Data in *FarmVille*

The collection of data for chapter five was carried out over more than two years of engagement with *FarmVille* via my own personal *Facebook* user profile. While *World of Warcraft* required that I paid an active monthly subscription to reactivate and maintain my access to the game's virtual environment, my access to *FarmVille* was much freer. To begin the process, and access *FarmVille*'s virtual world, I simply clicked a link within *Facebook* and then agreed to let the *FarmVille* application access my *Facebook* user information and post *FarmVille*-related messages and information on my *Facebook* profile. Once the *FarmVille* application this access, I was then asked to create an in-game avatar from a limited set of options, placed onto my own virtual farm, and presented with a basic tutorial on how to play *FarmVille* and succeed in the game's virtual world (Figure 3).

Figure 3: My *FarmVille* avatar on my *FarmVille* farm.

While *FarmVille* as a whole is free, players can pay real-world money to access premium content within the virtual environment. At the beginning of the project, I made the conscious decision that while studying *FarmVille* I would limit, myself to use only in-game resources and not spend real-world money. For much of my engagement with *FarmVille* I found it very easy to walk away from the game for weeks, if not months, at a time if required. The times I did something similar in *World of Warcraft*, I found myself well behind the curve, as if the entire world had somehow passed me by and left me behind.

The people that I came to call my *FarmVille* neighbors were also my own real world and online *Facebook* friends. In time, I eventually downloaded the *FarmVille* iPhone application, as well, to provide myself with another way of engaging with *FarmVille*'s virtual environment on a mobile platform. All of the experiences cited in this chapter come from this period of time with *FarmVille.*

The use of my own personal *Facebook* account as the platform for this research no doubt colored my experiences in *FarmVille.* I have no doubt that another *FarmVille* user with a different group of *Facebook* friends may have an entirely different experience with *FarmVille* than the one I describe in chapter five. This is an inherent limitation in trying to study a "social" game like *FarmVille.* Because these kinds of games build upon existing social contacts, one's *FarmVille* experience depends entirely upon external factors.

In structuring my engagement with *FarmVille*, I have tried to adapt to the nature of *FarmVille* as a "casual" game during the research period. This meant that rather than trying to fully immerse myself in *FarmVille* for extended periods of research time, and to the exclusion of all other things, I've tried to make *FarmVille* fit in with my day-to-day life and have therefore only made visits to my virtual farm as time and attention allowed. This meant that at certain periods during my research, I was heavily engaged with *FarmVille* and visited my virtual farm several times a day and several days a week. At other times I was minimally engaged with my farm, going weeks between checking in on my digital farm.

The Role of the Researcher in Participant Observation

As highlighted in the data collection sections of this chapter, I became an active participant within both of my chosen virtual environments. My experiences as an engaged participant are echoed by Sherry Turkle's appendix to *Life on the Screen* where she admits that hers is, "a very personal book" (1995, p.321). Any kind of qualitative research as closely tied to the experiences of the researcher as this project is requires a certain amount of critical self-examination as part of

the research process. Because of this, each of the following analysis chapters is interspersed with short vignettes explaining my personal perceptions of experiences that occurred during my research period in both virtual worlds.

Spending so much time within a digital body creates a unique relationship between the researcher and his or her in-game personas. Some researchers, such as Pearce (2009), have chosen to treat their avatars as research partners (Pearce even goes so far as to give her in-game avatar “Artemisia” co-authorship credit for “their” book). However, during all of my research I tried to maintain some distance and the clear perception that my in game avatars were not explicitly me. Rather, I viewed each avatar as a persona that I put on and a character that I played when I entered each respective digital space. This intentional creating of distance, along with my experience as a long-time computer game player, led me to view my various in-game avatars as just another set of computer game player characters. They were a digital element that I could control within a virtual environment and could use to experience that virtual environment. While others may see a greater connection between me and my in-game avatars in this work, or may experience their own greater connection in similar circumstances, my own perception of this critical distance was important for my work as a rhetorician examining these environments.

As rhetoricians, we learn to read the rules of a social situation and adapt our message to avoid or overcome that situation’s given rhetorical constraints. This project reveals the power of unseen and overlooked writing in terms of the programming code and guiding logics that underlie virtual environment

experiences. At the same time, it documents the constraints placed upon textual communication among users within these environments. By understanding the forces exerted on a virtual community by a virtual world's virtual environment, we can gain a better understanding of online architecture, and design, more generally.

Chapter 4: The Design of Experience in *World of Warcraft*

In late November 2005, multi-national computer game developer and publisher *Blizzard Entertainment* (hereafter: *Blizzard*) released their entry into the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) marketplace: *World of Warcraft*. When it was originally released, *World of Warcraft* was just one of several new MMORPGs on the market in the wake of the success of early titles like *Ultima Online* and *Everquest*. *Blizzard* was already a successful computer game software developer, having sold millions of copies from several lines of computer games (*Starcraft,* the *Warcraft* series of real-time strategy games*,* and the *Diablo* series of action role-playing games). At the time *Blizzard* had already developed a truly global fan base dedicated to their products with fan communities in the United States, Europe, and an especially large and vocal community in South Korea. It is therefore not surprising that in the intervening seven years since its release, *World of Warcraft* has quickly gone on to eclipse all of its MMORPG competitors and to become the gaming behemoth that it is today.

World of Warcraft did not make *Blizzard* successful, but rather it was *Blizzard*'s proven track record of producing highly polished games and its legions of fans around the world helped *World of Warcraft* become a phenomenon.

World of Warcraft is the largest MMORPG today by several measures: its astonishing number of monthly subscribers, the rapid sales of its latest expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*, and its level of popular cultural cachè. Because of this preeminence, *World of Warcraft* is the emblematic modern MMORPG.

As noted in the previous literature review, *World of Warcraft* has already been examined through several different lenses ranging from deep ethnographic studies of its player community, to spoofing by the TV series *South Park*. Yet all of these previous investigations and commentaries make one key oversight; they fail to make a clear separation between the community of *World of Warcraft*'s players and the game of *World of Warcraft* itself. This distinction between player and game, between virtual community and virtual environment, is necessary if we wish to gain a better and deeper understanding of the power dynamics at play within this complex virtual world.

With this distinction in mind, this chapter examines the ways in which the digital environment of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* places its users within a particular design of experience and how this design enforces a particular framework for interacting with the game world. Drawing on the research questions presented in chapter one, it explores the following question: *How does World of Warcraft's virtual environment pressure its users to act within that virtual environment?* In answering this question, it explores how the digital design of this virtual environment structures its users' interactions with the game world itself and with one another. This chapter posits that the design of the environment and the narrative of *World of Warcraft* work to place a distinct framework around the

game's users' experiences and that this designed framework directs users to act in certain ways.

After an initial description of *World of Warcraft*, this chapter proceeds in two sections. The first section identifies three key pressures exerted on players within *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment: a focus on gameplay, a focus on the utility that players provide to one another, and the pressure to engage in what I describe as "purposeful social interactions" with other players and within player guilds. The second section of the chapter documents three relatively recent changes to the structure of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment that demonstrate these pressures on play in action: the implementation of a "dungeon finder" system that provides players with easy access to randomly formed in-game groups, the implementation of the *"Real ID"* social network that links players across the whole catalogue of games produced by *Blizzard Entertainment*, and the restructuring of the in-game world and several in-game mechanics that coincided with the release of *World of Warcraft*'s most recent expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*.

Examining these pressures on play and the designed nature of *World of Warcraft's* virtual environmental as separate from the larger consideration of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual community allows us to gain a richer understanding of *World of Warcraft* as both a computer gaming system and a virtual world. *World of Warcraft* (and other MMORPGs) exists in a constant state of tension. On one side, the developers and publishers of these media experiences work toward a particular set of goals for their users. On the other side, users push and pull

against the constraints created by the developer's framework. When viewed in this way, virtual world games are one long ongoing rhetorical struggle where users attempt to negotiate particular ways of interacting and using these virtual environments.

The goal of this research is not to demonstrate some kind of conspiratorial desire on the part of *Blizzard* and other MMORPG publishing companies to repress and control their customers. Nor is the goal to suggest that *World of Warcraft* players feel overly oppressed and are unable to use their chosen virtual world in ways that are somehow denied to them. Instead, this chapter is an attempt to document the ongoing negotiations that users make with their chosen virtual world computer game. It is about how the design of a piece of software places a particular rhetorical and procedural framework around the interaction of its users within the game space and how those users react and adapt to these constraints. Thus when I say that a virtual world's virtual environment is a controlled environment, I do not seek to undermine the agency of these users, rather I seek to emphasis the negotiated nature of their relationship with the software and with one another.

Virtual Consubstantiality in *World of Warcraft*

The concept of "virtual consubstantiality" is central to our understanding of how users interact within the mediated experience of *World of Warcraft*. By virtual consubstantiality, I mean the whole set of mediated experiences designed into *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment that all players share. I argue that these common experiences act as a kind of "social glue" that draws a potentially

disparate group of players together to form a cohesive virtual community. In defining "A doctrine of *consubstantiality*," Burke (1950) argues that,

> …substance in the old philosophies, was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*. (p. 21, emphasis in original)

It is a shared set of values and experiences that links a group of people together rather than a physical sharing of substance. Players within *World or Warcraft* find themselves in a relatively open virtual environment. In order to make sense of this designed experience, players draw upon the shared experiences that come from virtually inhabiting the space. At the same time, the designed experience of the environment itself works to provide users with a common set of experiences. When viewed through this lens the virtual environment itself becomes a kind of a rhetorical agent. It places players in a rhetorical context and supplies a body of in-game experiences, symbols, and practices that lead user to see one another as virtually consubstantial.

Description of *World of Warcraft*

As noted above, due to its massive scale, *World of Warcraft* serves as a good case study into the power and architectural dynamics of modern MMORPGs. *World of Warcraft* sits firmly at the "intensive/hardcore" end of the modern-day computer gaming spectrum. At the opposite extreme lie less intensive, more "casual" games like *Farmville*. *World of Warcraft* rewards players for in-depth and long-term engagement with its virtual environment. The most advanced content within *World of Warcraft* requires players to spend long

periods of time focused on gaining the required experience, items, and skills needed to complete these in-game objectives and to work with other players to complete this content.

World of Warcraft places its players within an overarching narrative that spans multiple games. This same consistent narrative is told across all of the *Warcraft* series of real-time strategy (RTS) games. The first game, *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* was released in 1994 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: A screenshot from *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans.*
http://www.mobygames.com/game/dos/warcraft-orcs-humans/screenshots/gameShotId,1656/

As a RTS game, the original *Warcraft* put players in command of large virtual armies and then directed players to use their virtual soldiers to wage war on computer-controlled armies and other players. This original game was followed by a two sequels: *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* in 1995 and *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* in 2002. Both *Warcraft II* and *Warcraft III* were also immediately followed up by expansion-packs (*Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal* and *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* respectively) that added more units to each

army, more scenarios to play through, and further advanced the overall *Warcraft* narrative.

This larger overarching narrative is situated within the fictional world of *Azeroth* (Figure 5). *Azeroth* is a medieval fantasy world that shows all of the markers of the fantasy genre such as: magic, elves, dwarves, orcs, trolls, and dragons.

Figure 5: *World of Warcraft's* Azeroth.

The larger virtual environment is subdivided into dozens of geographically separate and distinct "zones" that players can explore (Figure 6). Within the confines of this broader fantasy narrative, players are presented with several activities within the game's virtual environment. There are allied cities to visit and enemy cities to attack, monsters and hostile characters (collectively referred to as "mobs") to hunt and kill, natural resources like plants and minerals to gather

and dungeons to explore and fight one's way through as a part of a group with other players.

Figure 6: Mulgore, a starting zone within *World of Warcraft.*

The world of *Azeroth* has been systematically expanded over the life of *World of Warcraft* as *Blizzard* releases new expansions, adding more zones to the game world and new content to the virtual environment. Each expansion is also further increased by a cycle of software "patches" released after the release of the initial retail package. Although there is no set ending to *World of Warcraft* (in a more standard, fixed narrative, computer gaming sense), a player's individual journey could be thought to "end" when they reach the maximum level. The "level cap" has been expanded 3 times, most recently to level 85 with the release of Cataclysm.

When a player logs-in to *World of Warcraft* for the first time he or she is immediately taken through an extended sequence that situates him or her within

the game's virtual world. First, players are asked to choose a realm (*World of Warcraft*'s term for a server) to inhabit. Once a player has chosen his or her realm, he or she creates a character using the character creation interface (Figure 7). This initial interface guides the user through a series of choices.

Figure 7: The character creation interface (as of patch 4.0.6).

The first choice a player must make is to choose a side in the ongoing conflict that is at the heart of the *World of Warcraft* narrative: "the Alliance, or "the Horde." Each of these larger factions has its own unique visual style and backstory within the game world. The choice of faction divides each realm into two parallel halves and specific in-game design features reinforce this divide. For example, players face an artificial language barrier between Alliance and Horde characters. Attempts to communicate between players on the two opposite sides are purposefully scrambled by *World of Warcraft*'s software.

Understanding this overarching narrative and how players are situated in relation to that narrative is important for understanding *World of Warcraft*'s designed experience. This larger narrative is one of the core elements that creates identification linking *World of Warcraft* players to one another. Put another way, it is the text that all *World of Warcraft* users have in common. This multiple-game-spanning narrative provides the backstory all of the interactions that occur within *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment and is the context for all of the shared experiences among the various users on each server. As such, this story provides the first building block for the virtual consubstantiality that links users together.

The choice of faction literally creates group boundaries with literal identifications and divisions between players within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. The narrative also helps both long-term and new players place their actions within the game's larger designed experience by providing a common set of in-game experiences and rhetorical symbols that users can share. Thus, when players engage with *World of Warcraft*, they are not just playing the game, but rather taking part in a larger collective story. When *Ensidia*, and other guilds like them, killed the Lich King at the "end" of the *Wrath of the Lich King* they were finishing an ongoing story that began in *Warcraft III* and they were taking part in an overarching digital narrative that dates back to the original *Warcraft.* In this way, *World of Warcraft*'s narrative creates a symbolic reality in which all users participate.

Once players have chosen a side in the game's ongoing conflict, they are then directed to choose a "class" for their character. A player's choice of character class determines the "job" that his or her character will do within the game's virtual environment. For example, certain classes like Mages or Hunters can only deal damage, while other classes like Paladins and Priests are capable of performing multiple roles within a group. Only after a player has made all of the above choices do questions of customization and aesthetics arise. Players can customize their characters by choosing a gender and making minor aesthetic choices from a limited list of skin colorations and certain physical features dependent on each race.

Once players have finished creating their character, players are immediately placed into a starting zone and directed to complete a number of short quests that: introduce them to the basics of playing as their chosen class, inform them of the game's back-story and the narrative of their chosen faction, and help to situate the player into the context of the virtual environment. For example, new orc characters are quickly introduced to hostile human non-player characters (NPCs). Once a player's character reaches level 10, that player chooses a specialization, or "spec," for that character based on their class. The choice of specialization defines each character's role within the virtual environment and more fully cements the role that a player's character will fulfill in group content within the virtual environment. When choosing a specialization, or "speccing," players are asked to lock in a preferred role by choosing from one of the three unique "talent trees" available to each class (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Druid talent trees and specialization ("speccing") options (as of patch 4.0.3a).

Each spec gives that character access to certain abilities at the expense of others. For example, a Paladin may choose to deal damage, but this comes at the expense of talents that would allow that character to more effectively heal or protect other characters in a group.

While the narrative outlined above provides the general framework for user's interactions within *World of Warcraft*, the process of speccing is an example where the procedural design of *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment directly affects players' interactions within the game's environment. Speccing forces players to make choices and, as a result of those choices, leads players to engage in certain behaviors within the environment. Speccing situates a player's character within the game's virtual environment and gives each character a clear role to play and predefined way to relate to other players' characters when in group setting. Thus, the choices of a character's class and a character's

specialization are fundamental building blocks for the designed experience of *World of Warcraft* and the creation of the virtual consubstantiality that links players together. Through these gameplay mechanics players are situated within a specific way of playing the game. While *World of Warcraft's* narrative provides a common set of symbols, the specialization system provides a means for creating overlapping motivations, the need for cooperation, and a means for cooperating. By forcing players to take on specific roles, *World of Warcraft*'s designers have created an online environment that requires players to interact and play the game in certain ways by making it impossible for any single player's character to be able to do everything.

This extended description of *World of Warcraft* clearly shows that there is more to *World of Warcraft* than just its community of players. Elements like the game's overarching narrative and the design decisions made by the *Blizzard* employees in charge of maintaining the virtual environment play a role in shaping what happens within the virtual environment. By documenting the process of "entering" *World of Warcraft*'s virtual space and highlighting some of the early constraints put upon users' choices and interactions by the design of the gaming space, we can begin to get a sense of the power that the virtual environment's design can have over player's experiences. The second section of this chapter expands upon this understanding of the design of experience by highlighting specific pressures encoded into the procedural design of *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment.

Interspersed through the rest of this chapter are brief narrative vignettes of my own experiences within *World of Warcraft* presented in an alternate *serifed italic text*. These scenes from *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment represent my best attempt to flesh out a multimedia experience in textual form. In some cases, these scenes illustrate my analysis, while in other cases, they simply serve to set the scene.

The Pressures on Play in *World of Warcraft*

Bradruk had just hit level 40 when he arrived in the desert zone of Tanaris. Having come from a Horde-specific lower-level zone, I made the mistake of leaving Bradruk in player-vs-player (PvP) mode. Up until this point I had read much about PvP combat in World of Warcraft, but had very little experience with it. Bradruk was standing outside the goblin town of Gadetzan when he was suddenly struck dead. A high-level Alliance rogue had stepped up behind Bradruk and unleashed a powerful attack that instantly killed him. I had no choice but to click on the button that released Bradruk's spirit and trudge back to his corpse from the nearby graveyard. As soon as Bradruk was once more embodied, that same rogue attacked again, and once more Bradruk was dead. I typed something rude directed at the Rogue into the chat bar in my user interface, but thanks to the Horde-Alliance language divide, it came across as gibberish on the Rogue player's screen.

At this point I realized that the rogue was "camping" on top of Bradruk's corpse. Sheepishly, I clicked on the button to turn off PvP combat and waited the requisite five minutes for Bradruk to become unflagged for PvP. Once he was in the clear, I clicked on the button to resurrect him. Deprived of his most recent target, the Alliance rogue went

into stealth and slunk away into the shadows, and Bradruk continued on with his journey. Forty levels later, I found myself on the opposite side of a similar encounter doing the exact same thing to an Alliance Paladin.

There is an ongoing tension within *World of Warcraft* between the potential uses that the game's virtual communities of players could possibly make of the game's expansive virtual environment, and the actual uses allowed by the designed experience of game's virtual environment. In order to better understand this tension, this section draws upon the experiences of two years of time spent in *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment. By understanding the rhetorical power of procedural design we can get a better sense of how users and the design of digital environments interact. This section documents three of those pressures: A focus on gameplay, a focus on playing a role and the utility that players can provide to one another, and the pressure to engage in what I describe as "purposeful social interactions" regarding playing *World of Warcraft* with other players and within player guilds.

To a certain extent, this division is artificial as it is hard to cleanly and clearly break these pressures into discrete and separate forces. For example, the pressure to focus on gameplay and the pressure to fulfill a clear and specific role within the game's group-based content support, and reinforce one another (i.e. one effectively plays the game by fulfilling a predefined group). However, by looking at each of these three pressures in turn, we can develop a greater understanding of the ways in which *World of Warcraft*'s virtual community is directed by the design of the game's virtual environment.

Pressure One: Focus on Gameplay

The first, and perhaps greatest, pressure on play within *World of Warcraft* is the pressure to focus on gameplay. *World of Warcraft* is, first and foremost, a computer game and despite whatever other uses players may try to find for *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment, players are routinely led back to playing the game ahead of other potential uses.

This is most directly seen in *World of Warcraft's* system of leveling and level progression. In order to gain levels, *World of Warcraft* directs players to earn experience points by killing monsters, gathering materials, and completing quests. These decidedly game-centric activities must be done before players can do anything else. Everything in *World of Warcraft* is tied to a character's current level. Certain features of the game are only unlocked when a player reaches a certain level; such as: talent specialization and Player vs. Player battlegrounds at level 10, the dungeon finder at level 15, and in-game mounts that increase a character's travel speed by degrees at levels 20, 40, and 60. Thus, the act of leveling and, therefore, playing the game become central to the experience of being in *World of Warcraft*.

Even the basic act of exploring the *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment is tied to a character's level. *Azeroth* is an expansive virtual environment, but in order to see it, players must focus on the progression of their characters before they can do anything else. Without playing the game, players are locked into low-level zones and prevented from further exploration by the dangers presented by computer-controlled monsters in higher-level content

areas. At the same time, if players spend too long in the same zone, they will eventually stop receiving experience points for killing low-level monsters which essentially forces players to move on. This built-in limitation is so effective that when *Blizzard* gives out free trial subscriptions for *World of Warcraft,* it limits non-paying players' experiences within the virtual environment by simply limiting each trial character to an artificially low maximum level. This essentially locks players into certain zones. Players also need to gain levels if they wish to experience certain content. In addition to the level requirements for zones, dungeons (5-person group content) and raids (10 or 25-person group content) require players to meet a minimum level before they can even enter these spaces.

By and large, the story of *World of Warcraft* is one of progression. Players make progress within the virtual environment only by playing the game. The design of *World of Warcraft* directs players around the virtual world. Through subtle directions, rather than by strong overt commands. The system works to erect hidden walls around players that do not engage in gameplay and therefore don't advance. *World of Warcraft* players must invest time into engaging with *World of Warcraft* as a game in order to advance their characters before being able to engage with other virtual community members. It is only through the designed process of leveling by which players gain access to the full array of features within *World of Warcraft*. The requirement to play the game colors all other player interactions within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. To overlook the central act of play and how players are pressured to play misses one of the core experiences linking the larger body of users together within the

game's virtual space. It is only through play that the virtual environment becomes fully accessible and one is able to fully engage with *World of Warcraft's* virtual community.

Pressure Two: Play a Role (Player Utility)

In addition to being pressured to playing the game as shown above, players are also encouraged to take on specific roles within the virtual environment as they play. This is seen in two ways: first, the utility that a player provides by taking on one of three clearly defined roles within a group, and second, by creating items through trade skills and engaging in trade.

Group Combat Roles

Much of *World of Warcraft* can only be experienced while a part of a group. At the core of group play within *World of Warcraft* are three basic group roles: "Tank," "Healer," and "Damage per Second" (or DPS). These roles correspond to specific jobs carried out in group-play situations. Tank characters are tasked with being hit by hostile computer-controlled characters (or "mobs"). A Tank's job is to protect the rest of the group by using his or her abilities to get and keep a mob's attention so that other group members can do their jobs without being attacked. Healers use their abilities to heal the tank and other group members harmed by the mobs that the group is fighting. Finally, DPS harm mobs by attacking and generating a certain amount of damage per each second of gameplay.

An elegant gameplay mechanic called “threat” (or “aggro”) facilitates the need for a group to work together. *Every* action that a player carries out generates aggro and mobs are programmed to attack the character that has the most aggro at that particular moment. Thus, in addition to doing their own job, players must also balance out their own agro with that of the other members of their group. A DPS player that does nothing but mindlessly attack his or her target will draw aggro off of the Tank and generally disrupt the entire group. A Tank that does not pay attention to counterbalancing the threat generated by the actions of other group members will lose the attention of a targeted mob and then force the entire group to react to the sudden shift.

Just as the leveling mechanic subtly leads users to have to play the game before they can engage in other in-game behaviors, the aggro mechanic subtly provides a quick and efficient means of binding a group together through virtual interdependence and shared interests. These group roles pressure players to rely on one another in order to succeed in group content. At the same time, players are valued within the virtual environment for their ability to play each of these three group roles in concert with other players. In cases where players ignore the common motivations created by this system, this mechanic begins to break down the core of the virtual group and its identification suffers.

Davenport [one of my alts], *a level 20 Undead Shadow Priest, was healing his way through the Wailing Caverns. The Wailing Caverns is a sprawling set of caves. Several paths lead to over a dozen different high-level boss mobs that blend into the surrounding areas and other lower-level mobs. The Tank, a Paladin, was having a hard*

time doing her job, mostly because the two Hunters in our group wouldn't back off enough to let her build aggro on the monsters she was trying to tank. It came as no surprise to anyone that I was resurrecting at least one of these Hunters after every fight, or that the Hunters blamed the Tank for their problems…

This relatively simple in-game mechanic has a profound effect on how players relate with one another in their in-game groups. Players are led by this design to fully adopt their group role and to specialize their characters in ways that will allow them to maximize their potential in each role. Rather than specialization based on individual preferences or desires, players are led to make choices that will best allow them to play with other. The aggro mechanic forces users to change their play styles and group interactions to accommodate this procedural design The aggro mechanic is so powerful that even small systemic changes, such as modification of the ways in which aggro is assigned or a change in how a character's abilities deal with aggro all have profound impact upon the larger group experience within *World of Warcraft*.

Trade Skills

In addition to these in-group roles, players are also linked through the in-game services that they can provide to other players. *World of Warcraft* has an extensive in-game economy wherein players trade goods and services for virtual pieces currency (gold). As a part of this economy, players are encouraged to take on trade skills in addition to their primary fulfilling in-group combat roles. Each character can only specialize in two of eleven possible professions. For example, during my time in *World of Warcraft*, I chose to have Bradruk specialize

in two gathering professions: skinning and herb-collecting. Because of this designed limitation, players need to network within the virtual environment in order to access the benefits from this broad range of professions. This networking can take one of two forms: 1) engage with other players through *World of Warcraft*'s in-game economy, or 2) create another character with different trade skill specializations and trade items between characters.

The personal in-game benefits for participating in this kind of specialized utility are immense. Players need to constantly update their characters' equipment to keep pace with the growing challenges presented by the new higher-level content released as a part of each game expansion cycle. User-crafted items made through character trade skills are often the first step on that process of "gearing up." Those that can provide these pieces of equipment reap tremendous in-game financial rewards. Even characters that can only gather resources, such as Bradruk, can find tremendous in-game economic benefits from selling raw materials to other players via *World of Warcraft*'s in-game auction houses for in-game currency.

Just as aggro works to bind a group of players together in a combat setting, trade skills work to create further social linkages between players within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. Players that do not choose to engage in these social exchanges are forced to create a multitude of supplementary characters in order to get beyond the limits placed on a single character. Together these designed interdependencies work to further cement player relationships by creating necessary codependence and aligned motivations

among players. *World of Warcraft*'s design creates a system that leads players to engage, and interact, with one another in specific ways. By leading players to take on specific roles and by creating incentives to trade with other players within the virtual environment, the designed experience of *World of Warcraft* takes a direct hand in creating player connections through procedural elements built into the game.

Pressure Three: Engage in "Purposeful Social Interactions"

It was the doldrums before Cataclysm hit. Bradruk walked through the streets of Dalaran, and for what seemed like the first time in a long time, my computer didn't slow down to a crawl because of the server traffic. I suppose it's not surprising, the Lich King was dead, the major challenges of the latest expansion had been cleared, and all that was left was to wait for the next expansion to drop in a few months.

I noticed a brief message flicker across my chat window pane: "LFM ICC10M [Looking for more, Ice Crown Citadel 10-player raid] *need 2 tanks and 2 heals then gtg* [good to go]*". I could have Tanked for the raid, but it was late, I was tired and as much as I wanted to go crawl through a raid dungeon, I just couldn't bring myself to sink the next 3 hours into a computer game.*

Players are pressured to engage in what I describe as "purposeful social interactions." By this, I mean that even the elements within *World of Warcraft* that might seem to be purely social are directed toward more game specific purposes by the game's virtual environment. *World of Warcraft* presents its users with a chat function as a part of its larger interface (Figure 9).

Figure 9: The chat window showing an in-game chat exchange.

Ostensibly, the chat feature exists within *World of Warcraft* to give users a chance to interact with each other and chat in a way that is not as immediately mediated by the larger game interface. The most active chat channel is the "Trade Chat" channel. Trade Chat is the one chat channel that is not zone specific. In order to link players together and enable them to engage in trade, the channel's content is displayed simultaneously to all players within each of the factions' major cities. Players can be sitting on opposite sides of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual globe, and still chat with one another in real time through this channel. This reach makes Trade Chat the default chat channel for trying to accomplish anything within the virtual environment.

Rather than a feature that reinforces a particular pressure, Trade Chat gives us an opportunity to examine how these larger pressures on play are expressed by the interactions of users within the virtual environment. The chat feature is perhaps the most open and overtly rhetorical element within *World of Warcraft*. It is where players can engage with one another in direct exchanges and, as such, it provides a key window into understanding the social and

rhetorical dynamics of this mediated space. If one spends enough time observing the chat channels available to players, he or she will no doubt witness several instances of "off-topic" chats. However, in my experience, the vast majority of the social interactions I witnessed over my two years were decidedly directed at the specific purpose of playing the game of *World of Warcraft*. Trade Chat, in particular, was not only filled with trade requests, but also questions about which piece of equipment is better than another, where players should go once they've finished up all of the activities in a zone, and attempts to create larger groups not possible through other in-game means. The overarching design of this mediated space exerts an overall pressure on users so that even seemingly open elements within the virtual environment are turned back into the overall designed experience of playing the game.

In addition to leading players to engage with each other more generally though chat, the design of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment also leads players to join and participate in player "guilds." Guilds are an organized group of players and these groups provide an important resource to players in several MMORPGs including *World of Warcraft*. Guilds are highly communal and provide a strong social component to the overall online gaming experience within MMORPGs. When I first started playing *World of Warcraft*, I quickly discovered that I had begun to consider the people I had connected to, and chatted with, over the guild-specific chat channel to be my friends. Several of my colleagues that have also spent time in *World of Warcraft* have expressed similar feelings about their own respective guild mates. My "guildies" would greet me when I

logged on, wish me well before I logged off, and would chat with me as I trudged through the game's virtual environment.

However, in addition to this overt social role, guild membership also brings with it several in-game player benefits including a pool of shared resources and a readily available group of people that players can call upon to tackle more difficult content within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. The relatively recent introduction of in-game guild achievements and guild-wide benefits for completing these achievements has only further reinforced the game-centric nature of guilds. In this redesigned experience, guilds are rewarded for organizing themselves into raids, completing dungeons in guild-centered groups, and doing other collective actions within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. As guilds complete these achievements, they gain experience points and grow in levels just like players. While guilds have always had a role to play within the designed experience of MMORPGs, these newer game-centric elements have affected the nature of guilds. This procedural reframing encourages guilds to be active participants within the game space as opposed to social organizations that occupy the game space. Thus, the social elements of the guild experience are ultimately framed by the design of the game and redirected back into game play.

This section outlined three pressures exerted on players by the designed experience of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. Players are led to focus on gameplay, specialize within predefined roles, and engage with other users through the overall design of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. While these pressures may constrain certain kinds of uses, they also all work together to

create and frame a coherent *World of Warcraft* experience and to provide the common basis for the virtual consubstantiality linking the virtual community of players together within the virtual environment. The common experiences of leveling characters, working together in groups and guilds, trading, and chatting about *World of Warcraft* all work synergistically to unify the potentially disparate player community.

The next section looks at three relatively new elements within *World of Warcraft* that further reinforce these pressures and reinforce this larger designed experience within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment: the implementation of a "dungeon finder" system that provides players with easy access to randomly formed in-game groups, the implementation of the *"Real ID"* social network that links players across the whole catalogue of games produced by *World of Warcraft*'s publisher *Blizzard Entertainment*, and the restructuring of the in-game world and in-game mechanics preceding the release of *World of Warcraft*'s most recent expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*.

Reinforcing the Design

The previous section outlined three pressures on play that *World of Warcraft* players experience during their time within the game's digital environment. This section outlines three specific features within the design of *World of Warcraft* that further reinforce those pressures. In each case the addition of these new features significantly altered the overall experience of *World of Warcraft*. In some cases either removing or simply making older practices obsolete, and in other cases making new ways of interacting possible.

The Dungeon Finder

The dungeon finder was added to *World of Warcraft* in December 2009 as a part of patch 3.3.0 near the end of the patch cycle for the game's second expansion *Wrath of the Lich King* (Figure 10). This seemingly small addition to the software had huge consequences for the social architecture of *World of Warcraft*. Before the advent of the dungeon finder, creating any in-game groups was a long and laborious social process. The process of creating a group involved spending time (sometimes hours) waiting in each faction's major city and repeatedly sending out "looking for group" or "LFG" messages over Trade Chat in the hope of attracting other players.

Figure 10: The Dungeon Finder.

Players had to work to find the right mix of other players' characters that were around the same level, had the necessary skills, and (most importantly) were interested in helping. This was real rhetoric: players engaged in both the persuasion of their potential group mates as well as using identification to form the kind of communal bonds necessary to create cooperation. Once the requisite number of other players was found, the group's organizers had to hope that their

group member's schedules would overlap for a long-enough window of time to actually complete the necessary content. It was not at all uncommon for a group to find four of the five needed group members, only to have one (or more) of the "confirmed" members back to out of the group during the search for the fifth.

Early in my experience with *World of Warcraft* I came to a point where I wanted to complete a dungeon, the Wailing Caverns mentioned in the vignette above. I spent days trying to create a group from the limited pool of similarly leveled players on the Horde side of the *Terenas-US* server. While this process was tedious and laborious, it also was a very strong community building activity. I was forced to call out to other players, both inside my guild and out to the general server population. To do so, I relied upon the shared experience of *World of Warcraft* and shared benefits to the entire group that would come with completing a dungeon (as outlined in the previous section).

All of this changed, however, with the introduction of the Dungeon Finder. Rather than having to work to create groups via a social process, players are now able to do so with a quick click of their mouse on a few icons. The Dungeon Finder randomly groups five players' characters together (based on each character's selected group role: one Tank, one Healer, and three DPS) and deposit the group at the start of the dungeon. This process is also open across multiple servers, meaning that now players are put into groups with other players they wouldn't have access to without the dungeon finder. The game also explicitly rewards dungeon finder groups by giving players rewards for sticking with a group all the way to the conclusion of the dungeon, in addition to the

possible rewards one can earn in groups created without using the dungeon finder. The result of this new system is obvious: once prevalent dungeon LFG messages all but vanished from the chat channels replaced by the ease of this new system. Community building and communication have given way to convenience.

The example of the dungeon finder shows how the addition of one in-game system can lead to an overall shift in the designed experience of a virtual environment. The dungeon finder system made *World of Warcraft*, as a game, easier to play and also reinforced the Tank, Healer, and DPS group roles. However, at the same time, it also made *World of Warcraft,* as a virtual world, less overtly community centered. While the ways in which the addition of the Dungeon Finder reinforced both the pressure to focus on game play and the pressure to play a role, we can also see a subtle shift in the overall rhetorical tone of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual world as a result of this new system. The previous method for creating groups was very focused on personal identification and more direct consubstantiality between *World of Warcraft* users. The Dungeon Finder process relies on the use of a more generalized sense of virtual identification created by playing the game and knowing how to play a predefined role within a randomized group.

Real ID

Real ID was another addition to *World of Warcraft*'s social architecture that had large ramifications on how the community of players could interact and organize. Released as part of Patch 3.3.5 in late June 2010, and at the very end of the *Wrath of the Lich King* patch cycle, *Real ID* granted *World of Warcraft* players the ability to chat with a self-defined list of *Real ID* "friends." This new feature created a new means of communication in *World of Warcraft* that the broke down the long-standing boundaries between each server and the opposing factions. For example, through *Real ID*, my colleague Tad and I could, for the first time, chat in *World of Warcraft*. This was despite the fact that Tad plays on the Alliance side of a completely different server. I noted earlier in this chapter that my choice of realm was originally made based on the suggestion of a former student who wanted to show me around *World of Warcraft* when I was just getting started. I chose my realm because he and I wanted to play the game together. However, with *Real ID*, players no longer have to go where their real-world friends are if they wish to interact with them in *World of Warcraft*.

Real ID also added the ability for players to chat with one another while playing different *Blizzard* games. Beyond making in-game chatting no longer realm or faction specific, this change meant that *World of Warcraft*'s chat was also no longer game specific. For example, when *Blizzard* released *Starcraft II* one month after the introduction of *Real ID,* several of my friends purchased the new game and quickly added me to their *Real ID* friend lists. While I was in *World*

of Warcraft's virtual environment, they were waging war in *Starcraft II*'s entirely separate virtual environment.

This transition, from specific in-game social networking, to a more generalized cross-game social networking drastically reframes our understanding of *World of Warcraft* as a discrete virtual environment. Rather than a self-contained virtual environment with its own discrete virtual community, *World of Warcraft* instead became one virtual environment within a larger virtual community of gamers playing all of *Blizzard*'s games. In other words, *Real ID* changed the overall social dynamics of the game by changing *World of Warcraft* from a closed off, bifurcated, and server-based social experience to a more general gaming experience across a vast array of linked virtual environments. *Real ID* reframes *World of Warcraft* into a single cite for the creation of virtual consubstantiality within the confines of a larger digital community, rather than a single virtual community itself.

Real ID can be viewed from two different angles. From one angle, *Real ID* can be seen as disruptive: breaking down the digital barriers had led players to engage with one another as members of a discrete virtual community within the confines of each *World of Warcraft* server. From the other side, *Real ID* can be viewed as expansive: letting *World of Warcraft* players situate themselves into a wider virtual community across several virtual environments. The long-term effects that will come from the implementation of *Real ID* have yet to be seen. During my research window little had been made of this new system, and my

own personal experiences gave me little reason to exclusively interact with other players through my own growing *Real ID* social network.

Simplifications in *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*

In December 2010, *Blizzard* released *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* (or simply *Cataclysm*), the most current expansion for *World or Warcraft. Cataclysm* presented players with a drastic restructuring of *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment. *Cataclysm* was the first expansion to drastically alter the existing virtual environment. While previous expansions had simply added on to the existing virtual environment, *Cataclysm* also reformatted the in-game world and made *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment more play-centered and player friendly. Older zones and quests that dated back to *World of Warcraft*'s initial release in 2005 were replaced with new graphically updated zones and a more streamlined and linear player experience throughout each zone. Locations and non-player characters (NPCs) that had been in place from the earliest days of *World of Warcraft* were replaced with new NPCs that directly guided the player through each zone. In-game systems, such as specialization, were also drastically restructured to fit into this new virtual environment's overarching design. Documenting the multitude of small changes brought about by *Cataclysm* could fill several volumes, but for the purposes of this study, I will focus on two drastic changes: The simplification of player specialization and the streamlining of questing within the updated virtual environment.

Simplified Specialization

Earlier in the chapter, I described the process of player specialization and how players use “speccing” in order to cement a particular play style for each character. The *Cataclysm* expansion brought with it a drastic overhaul of this process of character customization and specialization. Compare the version of the Druid talent tree from the previous expansion *Wrath of the Lich King* (Figure 11), to the current talent tree from *Cataclysm* (Figure 12). For each character class, talent trees were greatly simplified and the overall number of talents reduced.

Figure 11: Druid Talent Trees in Patch 3.3.3.

Figure 12: Druid talent trees in Patch 4.0.6.

For example, compare the old version of "Feral Combat," that had previously featured 30 talents the new simplified and reduced talent tree with only 22 talents.

In game terms, this meant that players had less opportunity to specialize their characters and fewer choices within each talent tree. The drastic simplification of "speccing" led to increased homogeneity among players' characters. Not only were each class's three talent trees reduced in size, the process of specializing was also drastically simplified and made more rigid. Before *Cataclysm*, players were able to freely choose across all three available talent trees. After *Cataclysm*, players were instead immediately asked to lock in a single preferred specialization at level 10. Returning to the previous example, if player were to choose to specialize a character in "Feral Combat," that character

would be forced to continue to specialize in “Feral Combat” until he or she had exhausted that talent tree.

Rather than the more fluid and open-ended system that came before it, the current specialization system is relatively simple and direct. This means that players now have less opportunity to customize their characters in creative or unique ways. This also means that, in-turn, player’s characters are more easily categorized into the standardized Tank, Healer, and DPS roles outlined above. This new design feature clearly synergizes with the Dungeon Finder system to create a more unified and streamlined character creation process. Now that players’ characters have more clearly defined roles, it is easier for players to slot their character into those roles when using the Dungeon Finder and therefore the larger game of *World of Warcraft* becomes easier to play.

Zone Restructuring

Just as specialization became a more linear and streamlined process, so too did process of exploration and questing. In the early days of *World of Warcraft,* questing was an expansive and social process. Several quests directed players to cross over from zone to zone. Players spanned *World of Warcraft’s* virtual environment to gather items, meet with quest-related non-player characters (NPCs), and join up with other in groups to clear dungeons. However, the directions for these quests were not always clear. This meant that players often had to rely on one another to complete quests. In a relatively famous pre-*Cataclysm* example, low-level Horde players were tasked by an orc NPC named “Mankrik” to find the remains of his wife in the expansive zone know as “The

Barrens." Little information was given as to the location of Mankrik's wife's remains. This meant that low-level players had to seek out other, more experienced, players that had already completed the quest for help. This experience became part of the real consubstantiality that helped to unify the virtual community of Horde players on each server.

This kind of opportunity for connection and identification was negated by the introduction of a new questing system and newly re-designed zones in *Cataclysm*. Previously large zones, like "The Barrens" were quite literally broken apart by *Cataclysm* and partitioned into new smaller zones. Quests within each of these new smaller zones were reorganized so that players now traveled to several questing "hubs" within the zone in a preset sequence. At each hub players are now provided with a predetermined series of quests in the immediate area around the hub. Upon completing each quest hub players are then directed, and in some cases directly transported, to the next questing hub. At the end of each zone's chain of quests, players are directed to the next zone and the cycle repeats as the player earns more experience and better gear for their character.

In addition to this new "hub and spoke" questing model, players are also now given a map that clearly directs them to the specific location within each zone to complete each quest. In the provided example, (Figure 13) the map tells the player exactly where to go in the zone "Ashenvale" to meet "Blood Guard Aldo Rockrain."

Figure 13: Directed questing in *Cataclysm* in the revised "Ashenvale" zone.

While zone maps, as a resource, date back to earlier versions of *World of Warcraft*, it is only recently that they've become this detailed and helpful of a guide for players. This allows players to focus on simply "grinding" through the game's content rather than going to the community or outside of the game for more detailed information.

The end result of both of these simplifications is a drastic reshaping of the personal and communal nature of *World of Warcraft*. Rather than players having to rely on one another to complete content within *World of Warcraft*'s virtual environment, the game now directs players to each specific location in turn. Rather than being able to tailor their characters to fit a personal play style, the game now directs players to shape their characters to fulfill particular roles within the designed experience of the virtual environment. These shifts in *World of*

Warcraft's designed experience lead to a new rhetorical reality within the virtual environment where the designed procedural experience takes precedence over other potential social uses.

It would be a mischaracterization to say that the systemic changes outlined in this section have in some way diminished the overall rhetorical character of *World of Warcraft* as a rhetorical environment. Instead, it would be more appropriate to think of these changes as having modified the nature of how players relate to one another. This analysis shows that *World of Warcraft* does lead its players to engage with its virtual environment in certain specific ways. In such a guided rhetorical environment, the primary means for connecting to other users is through the designed systems at the heart of the game. These new systemic changes have helped to streamline the overall *World of Warcraft* experience, making everything from finding an in-game group to chatting with an extended circle of friends easier. At the same time, these changes have removed some of the need for the building of an in-game community and placed more emphasis on players making linear progression through the predesigned content of the virtual environment.

This transition, from a more open virtual-world-like experience to a more structured and guided computer-game-like experience, lies at the heart of the modern day *World of Warcraft* experience. While players still have the opportunity and means to connect with one another within *World of Warcraft's* virtual environment, it is increasingly through the medium of World of Warcraft as a game first and foremost. This game-centered virtual consubstantiality still

allows users to connect, but we must be aware of how this different rhetorical context and reality affect the community that arises from it. We, as scholars, must be aware of the way that the design of a virtual environment and the pressures that this design asserts over the inhabitants of this virtual world if we are to hope to truly understand these digital spaces.

When a Virtual Environment Is "Just a Game"

On April 6, 2009, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) posted the following invitation on their *The PETA Files* weblog:

> The fight against the Canadian seal slaughter has gone digital!
>
> That's right, gamers, get ready: This Saturday, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) players will have the opportunity to combat a team of four Horde seal killers. We need your help to stop them from bashing in the heads of any more seals!
>
> Thrall refused to ban the slaughter of seals, despite multiple requests from the Alliance to do so, because Orgrimmar stands to make a large profit from the fur.
>
> Activists from across the Eastern Kingdoms and Kalimdor are banding together to put a stop to the atrocious seal slaughter. Anyone who slaughters baby seals for their fur must surely be in service to the evil Lich King. (Hulling, 2009, April 6)

In response, several readers posted comments. These comments ran the gamut from support for PETA and outrage over the real-world seal harvest to comments like those from "ddsep" who argued "Come on! That's ridicioulus! [*sic*] What are you expecting to happen?" PETA's attempt to use *World of Warcraft* as a new venue for protest ultimately fell short. This incident shows that, even before all of the recent changes outlined in this chapter, in the eyes of several of the *World of Warcraft* players that commented on this protest *World of Warcraft* was viewed

as a computer game first and a virtual world second. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that commenter "solus umbra" reported after the planned protest that:

> The funniest thing about all this is that even alliance players made horde characters to kill the participants of this event, in protest of the absurdity of this whole protest.
>
> please PETA. keep your animal rights protests out of our virtual reality and in the real world where it belongs [*sic*].

We can understand PETA's failed attempt at *World of Warcraft* rhetoric as being hampered by the role as outsiders looking into this virtual world.

The various pressures and designed structures outlined by this chapter show a number of changes to this particular virtual environment that reinforce this new understanding of *World of Warcraft.* Taking this entire chapter into consideration, it becomes clear that *World of Warcraft* is not as open a virtual space as previous scholarship has suggested that it is. As a game first and a virtual world second, *World of Warcraft*'s design puts a premium on gameplay at the expense of the social dynamics that so many other scholars are quick to champion. The problem is not that *World of Warcraft* is limited or limiting, but rather, the problem is that scholars too often expect this game to be more than its producers would like it be. We must keep in mind the role that designers play in shaping these virtual environments. We must acknowledge the subtle ways in which power and direction can be exercised within virtual spaces. Virtual world designers and producers do not need to expressly tell the users of a virtual world what they can and cannot do. Instead, through the exercise of digital design, they can simply make certain user actions impossible in the first place.

Chapter 5: The Design of Experience in *FarmVille*

In late June 2011, *FarmVille* celebrated its second birthday. For a few fleeting days, players that logged in to *FarmVille* were able to help celebrate by purchasing birthday-related crops (like cupcake trees) to plant around their virtual farms for extra *FarmVille* Coins and experience points. Players were also given the opportunity to purchase (through various means) and place several permanent birthday-related items around their digital homesteads showing that they had been a part of the *FarmVille* birthday celebration. The fact that *FarmVille*, an online computer game specifically targeted at the so-called "casual gamer," is now beginning its third year of operation is a major achievement in and of itself. However, around this same window of time other big things were also happening for *FarmVille's* developer and publisher *Zynga*.

While *FarmVille* was busy turning two, Reuters reported that *Zynga* was working through plans to make an initial public offering (IPO). Reuters further reported that *Zynga* hoped to earn between $1.5 and $2 billion from the stocks sold as part of the IPO (Damouni & Lacy, 2011, June 28). Three days later, on July 1, 2011, *Zynga* did file its IPO paperwork with the Securities and Exchange Commission. As a part of its IPO filing, *Zynga* asserted its operating philosophies and listed the principles behind designing their brand of online computer gaming. *Zynga* asserted that:

- **Games should be accessible to everyone, anywhere, any time.** From the beginning, we have strived to lower the barriers to *play* in people's lives. We want to build games to play with our parents, our children, our co-workers and our best friends.

- **Games should be social.** Every week our teams test new features to make our games more social. Historically, our players have created over 4 billion neighbor connections. And, currently, our 60 million daily active users interact with each other 416 million times a day.

- **Games should be free.** Free games are more social because they're more accessible to everyone. We've also found them to be more profitable. We have created a new kind of customer relationship with new economics—free first, high satisfaction, pay optional. This model aligns shareholder value with delivering the best player experience.

- **Games should be data driven.** Our culture combines the creative with the analytical. We develop and operate our games as live services with daily, metrics-based player feedback. This allows us to continually iterate, innovate and invest in the content our players love.

- **Games should do good.** We want to help the world while doing our day jobs. Through *Zynga*.org our players have purchased social goods, raising more than $10 million for those in need from tornado-stricken communities in Alabama to earthquake survivors in Haiti. With programs like our Sweet Seeds for Haiti, our players have touched people around the world. (*Zynga,* 2011, July 1, bolding in original)

This design philosophy of accessibility and social integration has served *Zynga* well thus far. However, lower in the same document, *Zynga* offered its potential future investors a disclaimer about the risk involved in investing in their brand of social gaming: the main risk being *Zynga*'s inherent tie to *Facebook*'s brand of social networking experience as a platform for their games.

> We have benefited from *Facebook*'s strong brand recognition and large user base. *If Facebook loses its market position or otherwise falls out of favor with Internet users, we would need to identify alternative channels for marketing, promoting and distributing our games, which would consume substantial resources and may not be effective.* In addition, *Facebook* has broad discretion to change its terms of service and other policies with respect to us and other developers, and those changes may be unfavorable to us. (*Zynga,* 2011, July 1, emphasis added)

This linkage, between *FarmVille's* virtual environment and *FarmVille* players' online and offline "friends," makes *FarmVille* more than just another online web-browser-based game. Instead, *FarmVille* represents a new kind of computer gaming experience and a new style of virtual world design that blurs the boundaries between online and offline interactions.

Though often derided by members of the more traditional computer gaming community, *FarmVille* is arguably more popular and more widely played than several of its computer game contemporaries. On September 12, 2011, *FarmVille* boasted of some 36,033,469 "monthly active users." By examining *FarmVille*'s powerful confluence of social networking, community and gaming we can garner an appreciation for what this new class of social-media-based gaming means for the more general understanding of online interactions. *FarmVille,* as a game, presents its players with a virtual environment that blends together each user's personal online and offline communities, a distinct virtual space, and a deceptively simple style of online play. *FarmVille,* as a virtual world, presents its users with an easy-to-use interface, a way to reach out to and link with other *Facebook* users, and incentives to expand their in-game communities.

To understand *FarmVille* as a rhetorical space, this chapter examines the designed experience of *FarmVille* as both a computer game and as a virtual world. In order to understand this duality, this chapter explores how *FarmVille* works to connect its users as members of a virtual community and how *FarmVille's* virtual environment pressures that community of users to interact in certain ways. Drawing on the research questions posed in the introduction, it

asks: *How does FarmVille's virtual environment pressure its users to act within that virtual environment?* In doing so, it seeks to complicate our understanding of this seemingly simple online game and to expand our understanding of virtual worlds beyond the current popular conception focused on immersive, 3D-graphic-based virtual world computer games such as *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs.

After an initial description of *FarmVille,* this chapter proceeds in two sections. The first section identifies three pressures exerted on players within the designed experience of *FarmVille's* virtual environment: the pressure to collect in-game items, the pressure to connect with other users for in-game rewards, and the pressure to consume both in-game and real world resources. The second section of the chapter documents some of *FarmVille*'s in-game mechanics that reinforce these pressures: the designed simplicity of the game's interface, the automation of both in-game and out-of-game communication, and the portability of the virtual environment across several computers and platforms. Taking these pressures and in-game mechanics into consideration provides digital media and rhetorical theory scholars with a way of understanding this new kind of virtual environment and an increased appreciation for the kinds of complex interactions at work behind a relatively simple façade.

Virtual Consubstantiality in *FarmVille*

Virtual consubstantiality is also central understand how virtual communities form and function within *FarmVille's* designed experience. Just as in the case of *World of Warcraft*, *FarmVille's* virtual environment provides users

with the "common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*" (Burke, 1950, p. 21, emphasis in original). However, unlike *World of Warcraft*, *FarmVille*'s virtual environment enacts much less rhetorical agency over players in terms of developing this virtual consubstantiality.

World of Warcraft's designed experience pressures players to work together by enforcing gameplay mechanics that require players to identify with one another. In this way *Word of* Warcraft's virtual environment acts as a rhetorical agent by creating virtual consubstantiality among players. *FarmVille*'s designed experience works to expand upon the existing virtual and real world consubstantiality already linking *FarmVille* players by providing a common set of experience and upon which players can draw. Farmville builds upon existing social ties among an already linked group of *Facebook* friends, rather than pressuring potentially disparate users into forming a new virtual community.

Description of *FarmVille*

FarmVille is a web-browser-based computer game. It utilizes Adobe's *Flash Player* software to create a small, self-contained application within a larger website. Adobe's *Flash Player* (or simply *Flash*) is free software that is widely distributed across many modern internet users' computers. This simple "plug-in" to one's internet browser allows for rich user experiences like the interactive menus and animations seen on several major companies' websites. The seemingly ubiquitous nature of *Flash* means that most internet users already have everything they need to run games like *FarmVille* on even a basic personal computer. Unlike other modern computer games, which often require specific

computer hardware, *FarmVille* can be run on any computer with an up-to-date internet browser. This means that the potential pool of *FarmVille* players will always outnumber the potential user base for more hardware-intensive games and virtual environments. This low technological cost explains, in part, the vast number of users playing *FarmVille* and other games like it today.

FarmVille, appropriately, presents each player with a digital idealized green pasture on which they can start his or her own online farm (Figure 14).

Figure 14: My *FarmVille* avatar standing amid "tilled" and "fallow" plots of land.

Players create an in-game avatar and are then tasked with making their farm run in whatever manner they see fit. The gameplay of *FarmVille* is built upon the repetition of a set of fairly simple actions. The core gameplay experience is controlled entirely through in-game context menus and mouse clicks. Players click on areas of the in-game grid based map to turn them into tilled plots of land, click again to plant simulated crops in those tilled plots, and then click again to

harvest those crops some predetermined period of time later. Actions are carried out in real time. As the player continues to click on various tasks around his or her farm, the game's software creates a queue of action and then directs the player's *FarmVille* avatar to process that queue. Queued actions are processed as long as *FarmVille*'s web-browser window remains open. For example, at several times in the writing of this chapter, I queued up actions to process in a background window on my computer as I worked in a foreground window.

While other online games may require specific technology or expertise to engage with their virtual environments, *FarmVille*'s designed experience is purposefully much simpler and more accessible. The low technological requirements to play *FarmVille* and the simplistic nature of its gameplay work in concert to create a new kind of virtual world experience that anyone could play if they so choose. *Zynga*'s choice to tie *FarmVille* to *Facebook*'s social network also reinforces the accessibility of this virtual environment. Arguably, *Facebook*'s relatively simple and user-friendly technological architecture, and the built-in community of users that this architecture brings with it, account in large part for *FarmVille's* success as a computer game and as a virtual world. By attaching itself to the *Facebook* experience, *FarmVille* becomes integrated into the larger virtual consubstantiality linking all *Facebook* users, in addition to being its own locus for the formation of virtual identification.

Players earn both *"FarmVille* Coins" and experience points for completing in-game procedures and engaging with *FarmVille's* virtual environment. These resources can then be further invested in expanding and improving a user's

online farm. *FarmVille* Coins are one of two in-game currencies (the second, "Farm Cash," is discussed below) and are earned through various virtual farm processes enacted by the player. For example, harvesting a mature patch of pineapples earns a player 242 Coins. Once earned, Coins are then "spent" to convert used "fallow" plots of land to "tilled" plots ready for planting, purchase more (and more expensive) crop seeds, plant fruit trees, build farm structures, buy pets and farm animals, and eventually expand the total area of a player's farm. All of these actions provide players with additional sources of Coins, creating an ongoing cycle of earning, spending, and consumption.

In addition to earning *FarmVille* Coins, several steps in the above farming process also earn the player experience points. Just as in *World of Warcraft*, these points are automatically accrued as the player interacts with the various elements around his or her digital farm. Once a player accumulates enough experience points, they gain in level. As players increase in level, they "unlock" more features within *FarmVille*'s virtual environment like more profitable crops and new gameplay mechanics like breeding farm animals, using tractors to speed up the farming process, and the ability to trade crops with other players. Despite the repetitive and seemingly simplistic nature of these tasks, *FarmVille* is far from a simple game. The broad array of farming choices presented to players means that they have the ability to structure the game to suit their own personal play style and schedule. The clearest example of this is the various choices of crops presented to players in *FarmVille*'s "market" (Figure 15).

Figure 15: *FarmVille's* market interface showing costs in *FarmVille Coins*, level-locked crops, and various crop harvest times.

One's choice of which crops to plant dictates one's pace of play. Once a player has planted his or her crops, he or she must then wait for those crops to mature before they can be harvested and the plot of land can be reprocessed and replanted. This built-in delay can be as short as two hours or as long as four days. Once a player's crops have matured, that player has a limited window during which he or she must harvest those crops before they "wither." Withered crops cannot be harvested and, thus, represent a loss of resources. Alternatively, players can also plant trees and raise farm animals, both of which provide players with a renewable source of income in exchange for longer maturation times. This variable timeframe means that players can build their own schedule within *FarmVille*'s game space and therefore fit their experience in this virtual environment to their offline lives. If a player wishes to be constantly involved with his or her farm and to be constantly checking in on that farm's progress, they can

create such a scenario by planting more quickly maturing crops. Conversely, if a player wishes to play a slower game, he or she can plant longer maturing crops and spend days away from *FarmVille* as those crops mature.

This ability to vary one's personal play style through crop selection is another procedural element within *FarmVille*'s designed experience that helps players engage with *FarmVille* on their own terms. Just as the designed simplicity of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment and the game's integration into *Facebook* work together to draw in a larger pool of possible users, the broad array of available crops allows players to adapt and structure their experience within *FarmVille*'s virtual environment to fit into their offline lives. While other virtual world computer games may strive to separate a user's online and offline experiences, *FarmVille*'s design works to integrate itself into the general flow of a user's daily experiences. When viewed in this way, *FarmVille* then becomes a part of each user's overall digital life, rather than a bounded and separate space with a bounded and separate experience. The importance of understanding of *FarmVille* as a virtual environment that can be adapted to fit within the greater confines of a user's offline life is explained below.

In addition to experience points and *FarmVille* Coins, players are also tasked with accumulating "neighbors." Neighbors are other *FarmVille* players that have agreed to link their *FarmVille* account with another player's account. The role that neighbors play in *FarmVille* is two-fold. First, players are able to visit, and help out, their neighbors' virtual farms. While visiting each other's virtual farms, neighbors can then help one another by doing a number of virtual farm-

related tasks. These tasks mirror what a real-world neighbor might do to help out a fellow farmer such as tilling his or her neighbor's land, helping harvest mature crops, sending parts or supplies to aid in the construction of a new building, fertilizing the neighbor's already planted crops, and sending and receiving gifts. Doing so awards the visiting player with experience and lessens the overall work load of the digital farmer being visited.

Secondly, neighbors act as another resource that players must accumulate. Players must connect with a prerequisite number of neighbors in order to purchase certain in-game items. Perhaps most significantly, players cannot purchase the in-game upgrade that allows them to expand the overall area of their farms unless they collect enough neighbors to "unlock" it (Figure 16). This simple in-game requirement provides *FarmVille* users with a strong incentive to collect as many neighbors as possible. To not reach out and build up an in-game community of neighbors means that a player is essentially limited in the amount of room that they have to farm. This mechanic also has broad ramifications for how *FarmVille*'s virtual community of players functions within the game's virtual environment. Rather than simply being a community of peers with which to interact, one's *FarmVille* neighbors also become a resource to collect, and utilize, for further rewards within the game space.

Figure 16: Features like farm expansions remain locked until the player has added the requisite number of neighbors to their personal *FarmVille* community.

At a certain point, further progress becomes increasingly difficult without accumulating a large group of *FarmVille* neighbors.

Through the neighbor game mechanic, *FarmVille* capitalizes upon each user's personal connections and mobilizes the real world and online identification that comes with those connections within the game's virtual environment. *FarmVille* draws upon the existing virtual consubstantiality between *Facebook* users to build its own virtual community. *FarmVille* requires players to be social in order to advance in the game. In this way, *FarmVille* takes full advantage of the community created by *Facebook*'s social network and thus has access to a ready supply of potential new users by tapping into *Facebook* as a "gaming platform."

When viewed in this light, *FarmVille* can be understood as a new kind of virtual world. This new style of virtual world places its users within a bounded virtual environment, but then also constantly reaches outside of that environment to create connections between users in other social and rhetorical spaces. In this way, *FarmVille* reframes our understanding of virtual community as something that is created by both the experiences that occur within a virtual environment and by drawing upon outside social connections to foster virtual consubstantiality within the virtual environment.

FarmVille players may not all inhabit the same virtual environment at the same time, but they are none-the-less part of a larger virtual community. It would, therefore, be more accurate to think about players as forming smaller personal enclaves within the single, larger virtual community of *FarmVille* players and with their *Facebook* friends. This blurring of the line between online spaces and offline communities necessarily requires a more complicated and nuanced understanding of what constitutes a virtual world and how the virtual consubstantiality linking the members of a virtual community should be understood. Because of this difference, I argue that *FarmVille* represents a new kind of virtual world. While games like *World of Warcraft* create an intrinsically-linked and internalized virtual world that is contained within a unified virtual environment, *FarmVille* creates an extrinsically-linked and externalized virtual world that transcends the confines of a single virtual environment. If we are to understand virtual communities as formed and maintained by the creation of

virtual consubstantiality, we must account for this new conception of how to link a virtual community to a virtual environment to create a fully featured virtual world.

This theoretical shift from an internal to an external virtual world where online interactions bleed over into a user's offline life and offline identifications also means that *FarmVille* challenges our conception of what it means to "inhabit" a virtual world. While it is easy to document the number of people that are on a given server within a closed virtual environment, the exact number of people engaged with *FarmVille* at any given moment is less clear. In part, this stems from the fact that *FarmVille* is not a game that can be played for hours on end. It is designed to be played in small blocks of time and requires that, at certain points, its users walk away from the game space in order for the game's digital procedures to occur in the player's absence. This does not mean, however, that these players have really "left" *FarmVille*'s virtual space. If anything, this sense of inhabiting their virtual farmstead follows users into their offline lives. Players know that they will eventually need to return to their digital farms in order to complete the work nearing maturation in their "absence."

Taking this extended description into consideration, it becomes clear that *FarmVille* presents a challenge to our current conception of what virtual worlds are and how they function. Games like *FarmVille* lie somewhere between gaming and social networking and, as such, challenge the comfortable and relatively stable framework of computer-mediated communication genres used to classify digital spaces like *World of Warcraft* as virtual worlds and other, less-immersive, games as something else. Rather than a defined digital space that users inhabit

at the same time, the virtual community of *FarmVille* is something more akin to virtual communities found on other, non-gaming, internet spaces. The virtual community of *FarmVille* is made up of like-minded *Facebook* friends that choose to link their accounts together. Looking to examples outside of the internet, *FarmVille'*s community overlaps with the kinds of shared interests, experiences, and engagements that form around other, non-interactive electronic media like television and film fan-communities.

The Pressures on Play in *FarmVille*

In order to better understand how users interact within this new style of virtual world, this section looks at how users are situated by the designed experience of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment. To that end, this section documents three procedural pressures exerted over *FarmVille* users: the pressure to collect in-game items, the pressure to connect with other players, and the pressure to consume both in-game and real world resources.

Just as with the pressures documented in the previous chapter, to certain extent, this division is artificial. It is hard to cleanly break these pressures into neat discrete categories. For example, the pressure to collect and the pressure to consume are integrally related. However, by looking at each of these three pressures in turn, we can develop a greater understanding of the ways in which players are pressured by the designed experience of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment.

Pressure One: Collect Resources and In-Game Items

The core gameplay mechanic of *FarmVille*'s designed experience is collection. Unlike other kinds of computer games that build up to some larger narrative climax, the "narrative" of *FarmVille* is defined by each user's engagement with the virtual environment and by that user's external social connections. There is no "winning" in *FarmVille*, instead players are led by the designed experience to simply keep repeating the same processes over and over again. With no clear narrative arc, the only way to mark one's progress in *FarmVille* is through the collection of in-game items and resources. Several items, like sheds or animal pens, unlock new in-game mechanics in addition to decorating players' farms. Others, like birdhouses, avatar costumes, or fences, serve purely cosmetic purposes and help players make their farms visually distinct. In addition to these more common items, players are also able to purchase special in-game items during special events or promotions. For example, during a recent *FarmVille* promotion celebrating Mexico, players could purchase several different Mexican-themed decorative items (like cactuses) and avatar costumes.

The purchase and collection of these in-game items and permanent improvements to one's farm become an important part of *FarmVille's* overall designed experience. The whole of *FarmVille*'s designed experience is directed at gathering and spending resources to collect items. To not do so would mean that a player has essentially sidestepped the game's designed experience and has essentially stopped playing *FarmVille*. While MMORPGs like *World of*

Warcraft can be (to a certain extent) inhabited and not played, *FarmVille* remains static unless a player engages in this core gameplay mechanic. Through the collection of in-game items, players create a log of their time in *FarmVille,* document their in-game wealth, and distinguish their unique experiences within *FarmVille*'s virtual environment from that of other players. It is through collecting that players can create their own unique personal virtual environments within *FarmVille's* larger designed experience. As such, this collection mechanic is integral to the personally designed experience of *FarmVille*. When viewed in this way, collecting becomes the common experience that creates virtual consubstantiality among *FarmVille* players.

This interaction between collection and offline identification was brought into clear focus by a cross-promotion between *FarmVille* and pop-star Lady Gaga. In the week leading up to the release of Lady Gaga's 2011 album *Born This Way*, *FarmVille* invited its virtual residents to visit a new special location only available to players for a very limited time: "GagaVille."

Figure 17: GagaVille in *FarmVille.*

Player visits to GagaVille (Figure 17) were conducted in the same manner as a player would visit a neighbor's farm. While this uniquely Lady Gaga themed environment was relatively static, the real action of the GagaVille promotion was the release of new in-game items that players could use on their own farms and the ability to access early tracks from the *Born this Way* album.

During the GagaVille promotion, players were given access to special Lady Gaga-themed *FarmVille* crops like crystals and chrome daisies. These special limited time crops could be planted on a player's farm to show their participation in the GagaVille promotion. These themed crops not only provided players with extra resources in terms of *FarmVille* Coins and experience points, but they also were integral to each of the daily quests that were added to *FarmVille*'s virtual environment as a part of this promotion (Figure 18).

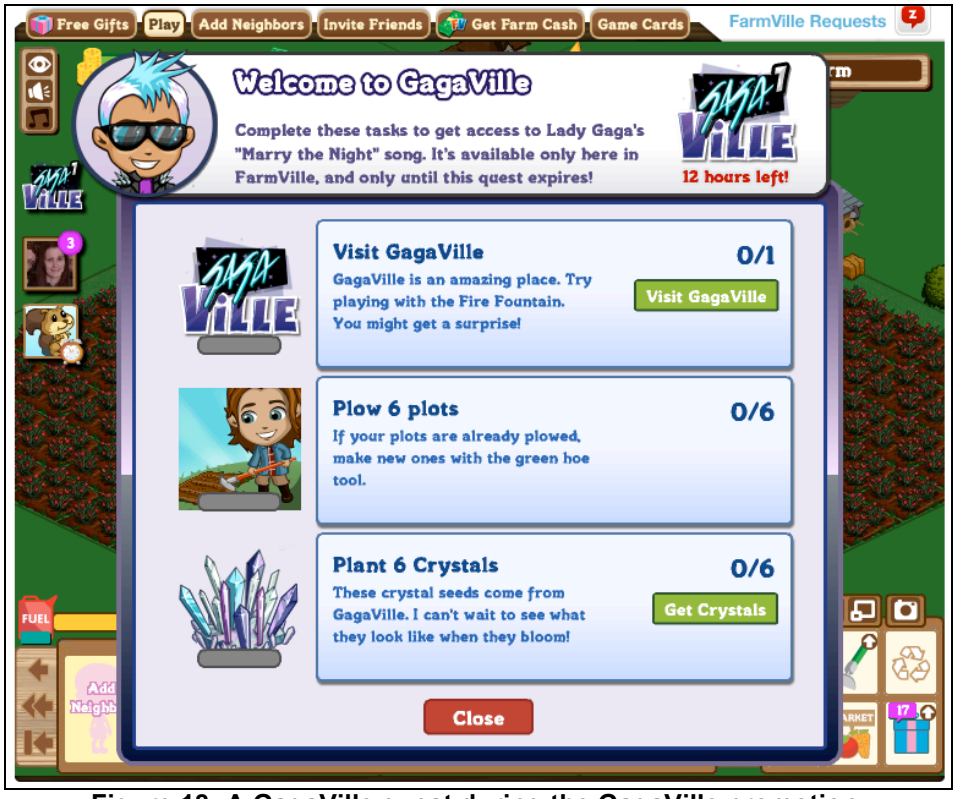

Figure 18: A GagaVille quest during the GagaVille promotion.

These daily quests used all of the gameplay mechanics central to *FarmVille*'s designed experience to provide users with another means to collect new and unique items within *FarmVille*'s virtual environment. In the provided example, players were asked to visit GagaVille, plow six plots of land, and then plant six patches of crystals on their own virtual farm. Once these actions were completed, players were presented with a pop-up window that announced the rewards that they had earned by completing the quest (Figure 19). In the provided example, I was rewarded with extra *FarmVille* Coins and a permanent decorative "fire fountain" that I could place on my virtual farm to signify my time in GagaVille.

Figure 19: Completing a GagaVille quest.

Outside of specific in-game rewards, players that completed the GagaVille quests were also rewarded with access to pre-release tracks from *Born This Way*. A new track was made available each day and, for a limited window of

time, players were able to access each day's track through a special web-based media player linked to *FarmVille*'s virtual environment (Figure 20).

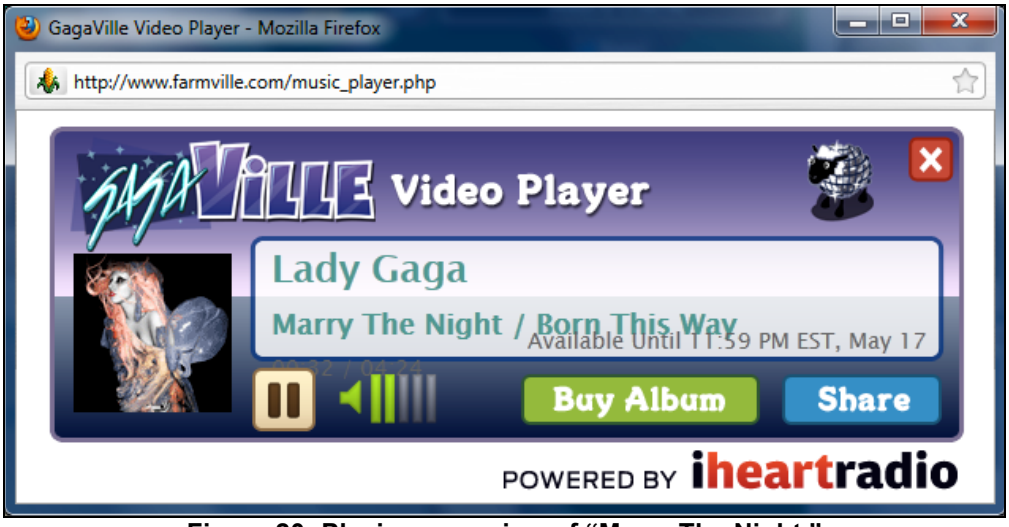

Figure 20: Playing a preview of "Marry The Night."

The GagaVille promotion provided a very clear and concrete example of the pressure to collect items and resources within *FarmVille*. Players were led to engage with the GagaVille content based on the in-games rewards they would receive. This promotion didn't ask *FarmVille* users to do anything extraordinary, only that they play the game using the same familiar in-game mechanics central to the larger *FarmVille* experience. At the same time, GagaVille also shows a clear point of crossover between *FarmVille's* virtual environment and the game's externalized virtual world. GagaVille sought to engage Lady Gaga's fans through the medium of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment. Players that came to *FarmVille* for the GagaVille experience, and early access to music tracks that it provided, were drawn into the designed experience of *FarmVille* by the required quests. Thus, GagaVille became part of the virtual consubstantiality linking *FarmVille* players together and, at the same time, was drawing new users into *FarmVille's* virtual

environment. It is only by collecting resources through digital farming that players earn the means needed to continue to work on their farms. Without the collection of items, players' farms remain static and unchanged. Thus, players are encouraged to collect both resources and items in order to advance in the game's virtual environment.

Pressure Two: Connect With Other *FarmVille* Users

In the above description of *FarmVille*, I noted that one's *FarmVille* neighbors act an important resource within *FarmVille's* designed experience. This pressure to connect applies to both creating connections within *FarmVille*'s virtual environment and within the larger virtual community of *Facebook* users. It is, therefore, not surprising that *FarmVille*'s designed experience gives players a strong incentive to reach out and connect with other *FarmVille* users via *Facebook*. In addition to reaching out to existing *FarmVille* players, *FarmVille* also tries to pull new users in from the general *Facebook* population. The procedural elements of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment encourage users to reach out, help one another, and actively expand one's *Facebook* neighborhood.

A player's true network of *FarmVille* connections frequently crosses the in-game/real world divide. For example, during the summer of 2011, I was pulled away from *FarmVille* after one particularly active research period. The suddenness of my departure and the length of my time away from *FarmVille* meant that I didn't get an opportunity to harvest my planted crops. When I did get back to my farm, I found that my field had withered and that I lost my investment

in the planted plots of land (Figure 21). Discouraged by my loss, I walked away from my farm to ponder my next move.

Figure 21: My withered farm, caused by missing the harvesting deadline.

A short time later, my virtual salvation came in the form of my old high school friend and *FarmVille* neighbor David. I received a *Facebook* notification that David had exercised an in-game mechanic, in this case an "unwither spray" that restored my withered crops to harvestable condition (Figure 22).

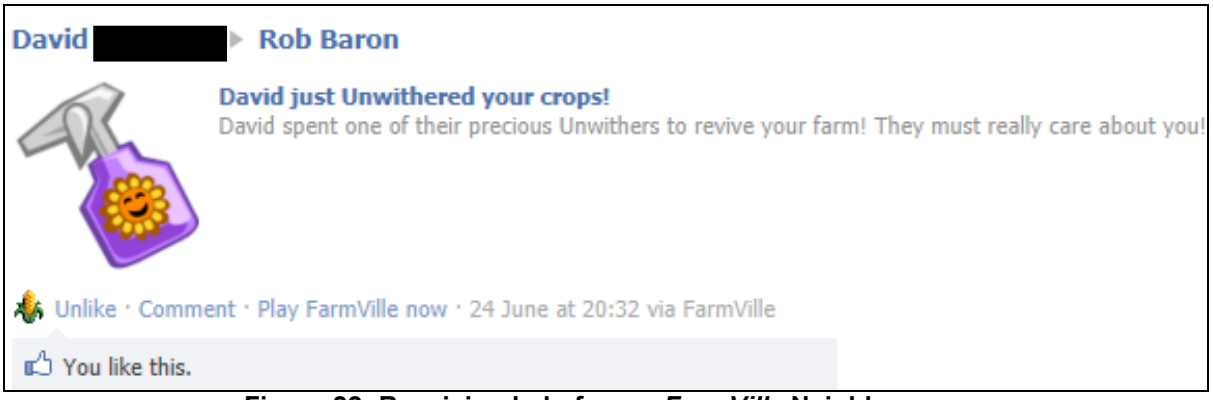

Figure 22: Receiving help from a *FarmVille* Neighbor.

I quickly harvested my newly restored crops and then went and visited David's farm to return the favor and see what I could do to help him.

I hadn't talked to David since high school, yet I found myself feeling real gratitude for his help, and returned the favor in whatever way I could. The designed experience of *FarmVille* makes these kinds of mediated social interactions possible. By building in means for players to engage with and help one another, *FarmVille* subtly pressures players to connect through in game mechanics. In my particular case, receiving direct assistance from a neighbor pulled me back into the game world and helped to strengthen an already existing communal bond. The unwither mechanic and other means of helping neighbors designed into the experience of *FarmVille* both draw upon, and help to reinforce, the real identification and consubstantiality between myself and my old friend.

In addition to these designed experiences, *FarmVille* also provides its users with a blank canvas for the creation of their own social narratives. In an example of this kind of emerging narrative: toward the end of summer 2010, I came to a point where I hadn't visited my farm in several months. As I expected, the soybean patches I had planted back in April had all withered and died. As I replowed the plots of land and pondered what to do now that I had returned to *FarmVille*, a pop-up window within the game's interface alerted me that a pregnant sow had wandered onto my farm. I clicked on the sow and a brief dialogue window popped up in front of me. It asked a simple question, would I like to return the missing pig to its original owner. Obeying my good citizen

impulse, I clicked the "Yes" icon. Another window popped open previewing the prewritten post that was about to go on my *Facebook* friend's wall:

> "Rob found this little lady wandering on their (*sic*) farm and wanted to return her to you. She's expecting ...baby piglets and Rob hopes you can help her and share the piglets with them!"

Feeling particularly social, I added my own note to the interaction and asked my friend, "Is this your pig?" A few hours later I got a response. My friend apologized for the inconvenience and explained, "She escaped the pen during the crossing into the slaughter house. I apologize for the disturbance baron [*sic*]" A few days later, my friend asked a brief follow-up question: "baron [*sic*] why are you on *FarmVille.*" When we later met face-to-face, I explained to my friend how studying *FarmVille* fit into my dissertation project and we talked about why both of us were "on *FarmVille*."

These kinds of assisted narratives help to make connections between players and to reinforce players' reasons for playing *FarmVille*. In cases like this, *FarmVille* acts as a common text between users. Rather than a separate digital space it becomes a point of connection that can be used to build identification both inside and outside of *FarmVille*'s mediated environment. These experiences create social branches that extend from the game's virtual environment out into the real world, and then draw those real world connections to reinforce the virtual environment.

Pressure Three: Consume Resources

Closely tied to both the pressure to collect items and the pressure to create social connections within *FarmVille* is the pressure to "consume" in the

game space itself. As noted in the above discussion of the pressure to collect, the conspicuous consumption of resources is one of the few ways to mark one's progress in *FarmVille* and differentiate one's self from one's *FarmVille* neighbors. Thus, players have an incentive to use the in-game resources they accumulate to buy bigger and more expensive in-game items and to outwardly display their in-game wealth through investment in their virtual farms.

It is also possible to buy one's way to "success" in *FarmVille* with real-world money. I noted earlier in the chapter that *FarmVille* has two currencies. In addition to *FarmVille* Coins, players can also trade in a second parallel digital currency: "*Farm Cash*." Farm Cash operates independently from the rest of *FarmVille*'s in-game mechanics. Players acquire *Farm Cash* either by doing things outside of *FarmVille* or by buying *Farm Cash* outright with real world money (figure 23).

Figure 23: Paying real world money for Farm Cash.

For example, during the summer of 2009, I received a coupon on a head of broccoli that would reward me with five *Farm Cash* if I provided *Zynga* with an email address. In another instance, after another extended absence from *FarmVille* (or at least an extended absence in the eyes of *Zynga*), I received an email that promised twenty Farm Cash and a special collectible item if I would return to my virtual farm and resume playing *FarmVille* (figure 24).

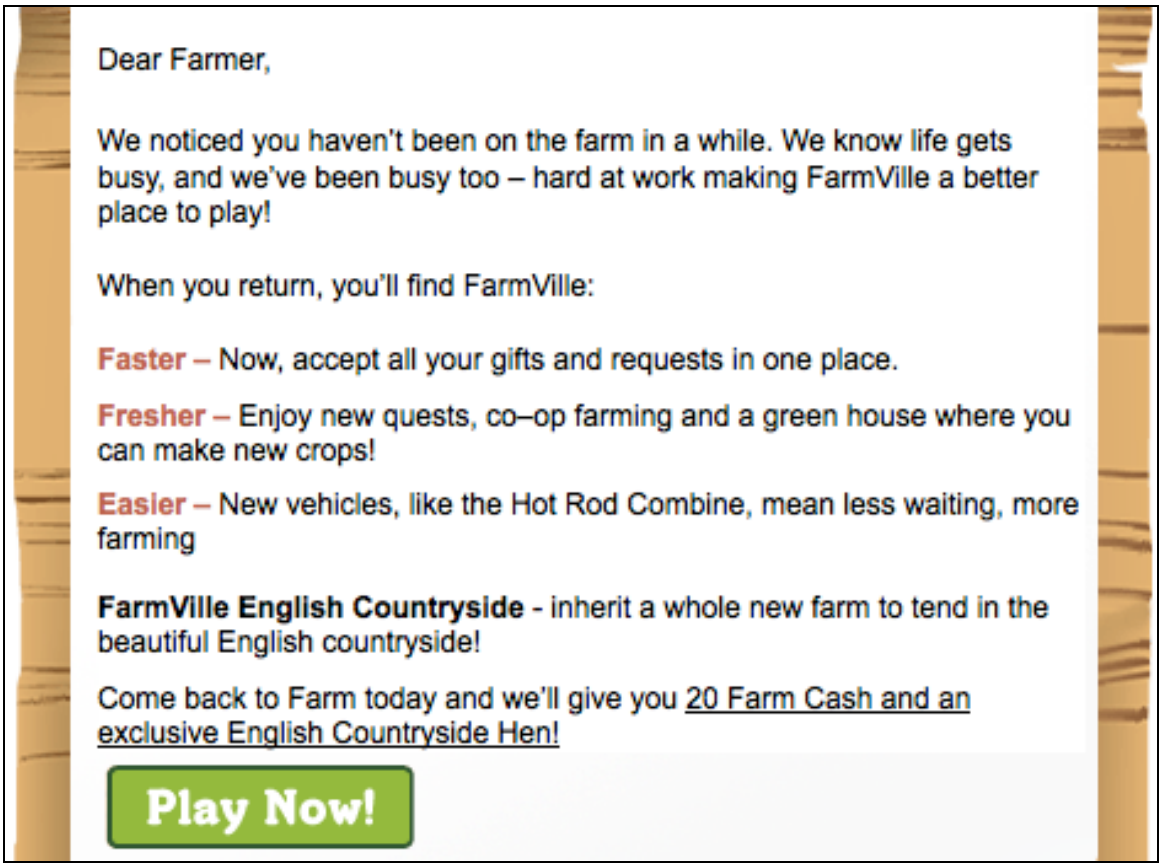

Figure 24: An email promising Farm Cash for coming back to *FarmVille.*

By using Farm Cash, players can sidestep many of the in-game mechanics that I mentioned above. For example, if one wishes to expand his or her farm without having to continue to accumulate neighbors, a player can instead simply purchase Farm Cash and then spend that Cash on the desired farm area-expansion. In addition to this mechanic, players are also presented

with several in-game elements that are only purchasable through the use of Farm Cash. Some of these Farm Cash-only purchases, such as themed avatar costumes or decorative farm items, are purely cosmetic. Other purchases, like unwither sprays or the ability to finish a farm building without the help of one's neighbors, drastically alter *FarmVille*'s normal in-game mechanics.

Farm Cash's role as an alternative means of accessing rewards within *FarmVille*'s virtual environment could be viewed as a rupture within the overall mechanics when viewed using a more traditional framework for understanding virtual worlds. However, when viewed as a part of *FarmVille*'s larger externalized virtual world and the larger pressure to consume resources to improve one's farm, Farm Cash becomes just another resource into which players can tap. It is also worth noting that Farm Cash also represents a direct source of income for *Zynga.* Thus, Farm Cash represents one key instance where the designers of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment have asserted their own economic interests over the virtual space.

Taking all of these pressures into consideration gives us a sense of how players are pressured to interact by the designed experience within *FarmVille's* virtual environment. The pressures to collect, connect and consume all work together to create an ongoing virtual world process that keep players repeating actions and working on their own small sections of a larger virtual environment. At the same time, players are led to make connections both inside and outside of *FarmVille* by the design of the game, creating a larger rhetorical structure that exists inside and outside the virtual environment at the same time. This common

experience provides the basis for the virtual consubstantiality that links players together within the larger rhetorical structure of *FarmVille*. By understanding how these pressures create a common designed experience among players, we can get a better sense of how virtual communities can be transported to offline settings and how virtual environments can be integrated into the fabric of offline life.

Reinforcing the Design of *FarmVille*

The previous section outlined three pressures on play that *FarmVille* players encounter within the game's designed experience. This section explores in-game design features that reinforce these pressures. This section looks at the overall designed experience of *FarmVille* and how design features within that experience actively assist in leading users to engage with *FarmVille*.

Simplicity of Gameplay

As noted several times in this chapter, *FarmVille* is a deceptively simple game. While *FarmVille* is often derided because of its perceived simplicity, it needs to be noted that this level of simplicity is an overall design choice made by *FarmVille*'s developer *Zynga*. As I cited in this chapter's introduction, the leading principle that *Zynga* claims as guiding their game design philosophy (as noted in their IPO filing) is that:

> **Games should be accessible to everyone, anywhere, any time.** From the beginning, we have strived to lower the barriers to *play* in people's lives. We want to build games to play with our parents, our children, our co-workers and our best friends (Zynga, 2011, July 1).

The *Flash* multimedia-platform that *FarmVille* uses is an incredibly rich and robust software system. *Flash* is capable of running everything from simple two-dimensional animation, to complex three-dimensional graphics, to streaming HD video. Because the *Flash* platform is capable of doing more, it becomes clear that *Flash* is not a limiting factor in the *FarmVille*'s interface and design.

Taking this into consideration, it becomes clear that *FarmVille* is not simple because it needs to be. Rather, *FarmVille* is simple because that this how it is designed to be. *FarmVille*'s simple mouse-based user-interface and simplified cartoon-styled graphics are design features that invite users in and make the overall game feel accessible. In this way, *FarmVille* actively rejects potentially more complex and complicated styles of play in favor of simpler and more accessible in-game architecture. One can see similar aesthetic and architectural choices across *Zynga*'s entire catalogue of online games.

By creating a purposefully simple designed experience, *Zynga* has positioned *FarmVille* to be a virtual environment that is both accessible and engaging to a larger group of players. This designed simplicity is an important design feature for understanding both *FarmVille*'s popularity and the virtual consubstantiality that links its virtual community of players together. *Zynga* created a virtual environment with which mothers, high school students, and 30-something PhD candidates all can engage and find similar experiences within *FarmVille.* Rather than trying to mold itself to popular conceptions of how virtual world computer games operate, *Zynga* has designed *FarmVille* to act as a new style of virtual world computer game.

Automation of In-Game Processes

FarmVille generates a lot of *Facebook* communication on each user's *Facebook* wall (Figure 25).

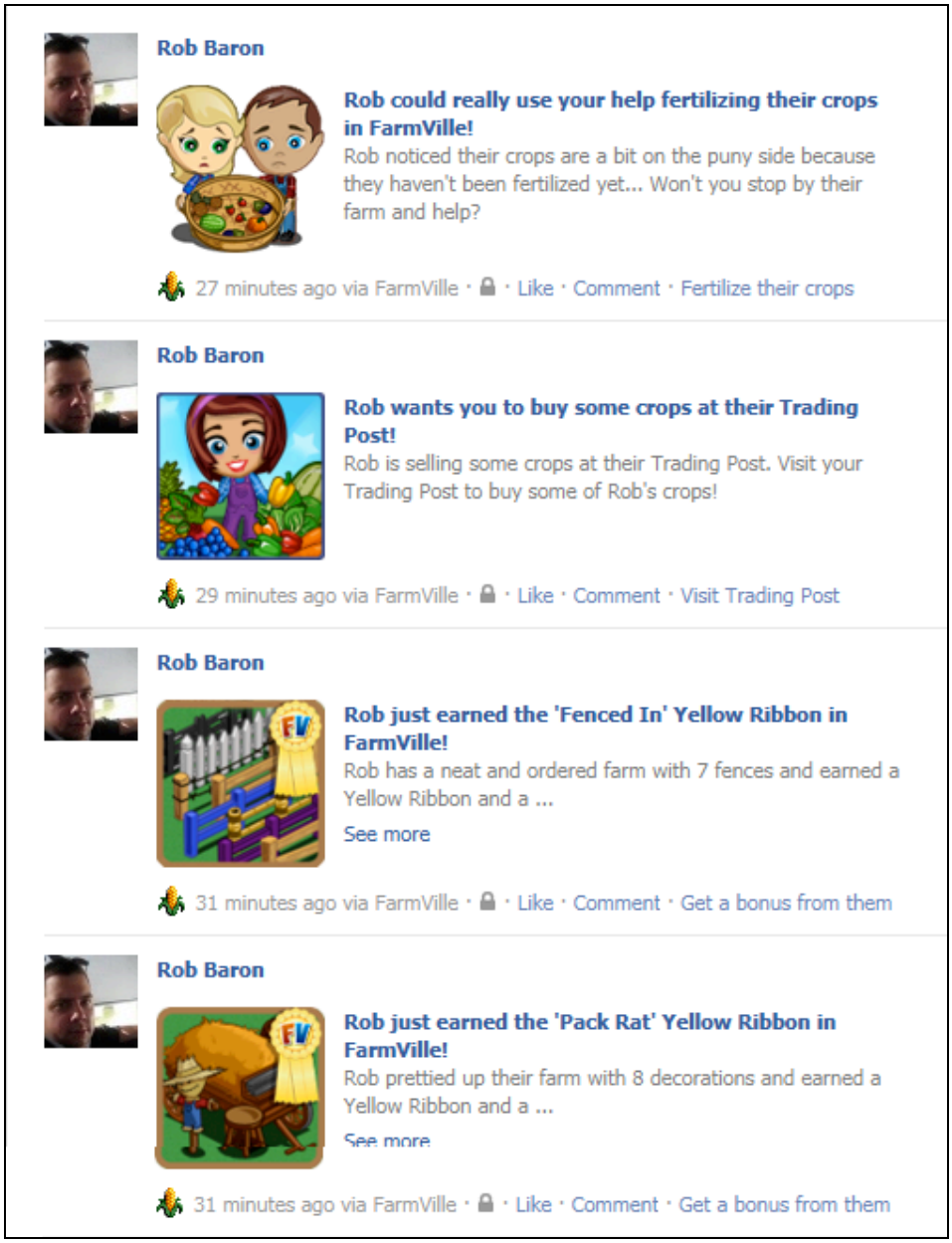

Figure 25: Several *FarmVille* wall posts.

Another important element of understanding the *FarmVille's* designed experience is the level to which the overall interface is automated. As shown above, *FarmVille* generates a great deal of communication on its users' *Facebook* walls

and much of the content of these messages is largely outside of each user's personal control. For example, Figure 25 documents a small slice of the many wall posts generated during a single play session in *FarmVille.* While players have the option to opt out of these kinds of automatic wall posts, opting out limits their level of communal engagement.

FarmVille generates many *Facebook* wall posts on both players' own walls and on the walls of their *FarmVille* neighbors and *Facebook* friends. These self-generating messages are a key part of the virtual consubstantiality connecting users in *FarmVille*. Players do not have to tell their friends that they play *FarmVille,* because these automated messages do that work for them. By automatically generating messages, *FarmVille*'s virtual environment advertises both itself and its users' engagement with the game. By sending automated message between users (as in the pregnant sow example mentioned above) the designed experience of *FarmVille* makes it easier to connect with other players though automatically generated player-to-player communication. Through automation, *FarmVille* decreases the kind of social friction that may prevent users from reaching out to one another. This kind of "person-to-person" communication reinforces, and builds upon, the virtual consubstantiality linking *FarmVille*'s players and friends together.

Mobility of Gameplay

Mobility also plays a large factor in explaining the overall structure of *FarmVille*'s virtual environment. I've already highlighted *FarmVille*'s nature as a web-browser-based computer game. In addition to the social benefits that come

from using *Facebook* as *FarmVille*'s gaming platform, another, perhaps less obvious, benefit from linking *FarmVille* to *Facebook* is that players can then access their *FarmVille* farms from any internet-capable computer from which they can log in to *Facebook*. This means that access to *FarmVille* is essentially mobile. Players are not tied down to any one single computer if they wish to play *FarmVille*. Instead, *FarmVille*'s virtual environment and a player's virtual farm can "follow" him or her throughout the day.

In addition to the mobility enabled by *Facebook* as an internet platform, *FarmVille* has also been ported over to Apple's iOS mobile software platform giving players the ability to play *FarmVille* on their iPhones and iPads (figure 25).

Figure 26: The *FarmVille* iPhone app's touch-based interface.

By using this iOS *FarmVille* app, players can access their farms on the go and maneuver around *FarmVille*'s virtual environment using iOS's touch-based interface. This provides players with even more mobility and means that they aren't tied to a particular box or platform. The ability of players to take the game

with them and to have the ability to fit the game in whenever possible reinforces the concept of an ongoing engagement and externalized virtual world experience.

This blending of in-game and out-of-game time is further reinforced by *FarmVille's* reliance on asynchronous communication via players' *Facebook* walls. As is documented above, when *FarmVille* generates communication to other players, it does so by posting to that player's *Facebook* wall. This means that most of the player-to-player communication that *FarmVille* creates exists in a virtual space outside of *FarmVille's* virtual environment. This further blurs the distinction between in-game and out-of-game communication. In a way, this style of communication more closely emulates that of sending emails or text-messages to friends as opposed to in-world, real time conversation as embodied in other Virtual world experiences. The asynchronous nature of these messages means that *FarmVille* communications essentially lie in wait until another user picks up on them.

All told, the designed experience of *FarmVille* pushes users to engage in a new style of virtual world play. Rather than the kind of all encompassing immersion needed to be successful in *World of Warcraft*, and other similar games, *FarmVille* requires a different kind of engagement, one that is mediated by the give and take, and ebb and flow, of daily life. In many ways, the design of *FarmVille* challenges our conception of how virtual environments and virtual communities fit together to create full-featured virtual worlds. Taking these design features into consideration, it becomes clear that *FarmVille* is not a traditional

virtual world. It has far more in common with the multitude of other "casual games" available to internet users online. However, just because its design is different, does not mean that we cannot overlook *FarmVille*'s role as a virtual world, or the ways that it creates links between the members of its virtual community.

Changing the Frame around Virtual Worlds

When I originally approached this portion of this project, I did so with the assumption that *FarmVille* would be the least interesting part of my virtual world research. However, it quickly became apparent that *FarmVille* offers an exciting new challenge to the traditional concepts used to describe virtual worlds. Taking all of this into consideration, it becomes clear that games like *FarmVille* challenge existing conceptions of what virtual worlds look and act like.

World of Warcraft represents the apex of traditional online virtual world gaming. It provides users with a fully realized and rich virtual environment in which those users can interact in a multitude of ways. In contrast, *FarmVille* (and other social games) represent a new kind of virtual world. Rather than a fully immersive virtual environment, *FarmVille*'s virtual environment and community are thoroughly couched within the real world. *FarmVille* successfully meshes online gaming relationships with real-world relationships by using *Facebook* as a gaming platform. Rather than a particular site that all the members of a community visit, *FarmVille* is a communal practice and a common cultural currency that the community of *FarmVille* players can trade in.

By examining *FarmVille* as a new direction in virtual world engagement, we can learn a lot about the nature of online communities and virtual worlds in general. If we restrict our understanding of "virtual worlds" to only comprehensive online environments, we miss an opportunity to interrogate the new large class of "social gaming" that *FarmVille* represents. Social games are meant to be played with others, but to not consider this class of games as a virtual world leaves out a potential rich body of research sites.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Reexamining the Pressures on Play

The existing research on internet communication, computer gaming, and virtual worlds all show a long standing awareness that our modern digital lives are situated within larger social and digital contexts that extend far beyond specific virtual environments or internet texts. With this contextual awareness in mind, this project began with the overarching research question: What kinds of pressures do modern virtual worlds exert over their users' interactions? This question focused on the central role that context plays in virtual worlds and sought to add rhetoric's own situation and contextual sensitivity to this greater understanding of online communication, interaction, and community building.

The analysis conducted in the two previous chapters makes it clear that, at least in the cases of the game-centered virtual worlds observed for this project, the overarching pressure exerted within each virtual environment work to subtly nudge players to play each game in specific, preferred ways. In the case of *World of Warcraft,* these pressures push *World of Warcraft* players to use the game's virtual environment to play the game of *World of Warcraft* ahead of other potential uses. Newer features recently added to the game's software such as *Real ID,* the dungeon finder, and the ongoing and overall simplification of *World of Warcraft's* interface have all led to a virtual environment where play is the

central focus. While other uses are still possible, the pressure on users is to play and engage with *World of Warcraft* as a game first and as a fully realized virtual world second.

In the case of *Farmville,* players are also pressured to play the game, but in the case of *Farmville,* that play takes on a different meaning. *Farmville'*s design of experience leads players to use the integration between their *Facebook* social network and the *Farmville* application to build their own smaller *Farmville*-centered social network. Players are tasked with recruiting more *Farmville* players from their own *Facebook* friends. Play in *Farmville* also means consuming both in-game and real-world resources in order to expand and improve each player's own digital farm. Specific virtual environment features like the automation of *Facebook* messaging, *Farmville'*s portability across several gaming platforms, and relatively simple software design all work together to create an engaging virtual environment that molds itself to each player's own unique schedule and own unique play style. This simplified social-gameplay mechanic allows players to vary their engagement as needed and seems to invite a broader variety of players to engage with the *Farmville* experience. When compared to the more intensive style of play required by *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs, the purposeful simplicity of *Farmville* becomes much more understandable.

To arrive at this broader understanding of the "pressures on play" this study considered two subsequent research questions: What is the designed context for interaction within these virtual environments? and: How are certain,

preferred, communicative interactions digitally engineered into virtual environments? To answer these questions, this project engaged in a lengthy participant observation-based examination of both *World of Warcraft* and *Farmville* and documented several ways in which the designed context for each game led users to engage in certain preferred behaviors while in the virtual world. These designed experiences play an important role in shaping user interactions within each virtual environment.

Considering these two examples, it becomes clear that the design of a virtual environment does profoundly influence the behaviors of that environment's users and does pressure players to use each environment in certain preferred ways. Player interactions within these virtual environments then should be viewed through this contextual lens first, before we attempt any greater understanding of other uses that may be made of these environments. In many cases, these pressures on play are subtly engineered into the very digital system of each environment itself. Just how often and how easily overlooked the nature of this design was illustrated to me very poignantly during a recent conversation. While working on the final draft of my dissertation, one of my debate students asked me to explain my dissertation project. As I gave him a thumbnail sketch of my arguments and observations about *Farmville*'s pressure to collect and consume resources he stopped me to remark, "Wow, that's creepy."

Virtual world design enforces a kind of "soft determinism" that pushes users to engage with each world's virtual environment in certain preferred ways over other kinds of uses. By better understanding the medium of online

environments we can better understand the content. At the same time: The design of experience provides structure for a virtual environment. Clearly these designs of these virtual spaces do have power, but little had been done to understand the specific internal context of online games themselves before this project. It becomes clear that the design and execution of a virtual environment do shape the actions of users.

The Implications of Designed Experience

What can we make of this new-found understanding of how the design of experience shapes players' interactions in virtual environments? This project has made some initial first steps in terms of trying to understand the role that design plays in shaping user interactions and uses within a given virtual environment. We can draw three implications from this study.

Structure as Enabling

The first implication we can draw from this project deals with the role that structure and design play in shaping the virtual world as a whole. At the start of this project, I approached each of these virtual environments with a sense of how I would deal with the issue of structure within both of these virtual environments. Based on the ideas presented by Lessig, Losh, McLuhan, and other media scholars and theorists, I found myself working with an initial assumption that structure would be, in a word, "bad." I thought that I would find myself decrying the controlling and limiting nature of specific designed experiences, and that I would be championing potential more open user-centered designs and less

controlling virtual world architectures. However, I soon learned that this assumption was entirely incorrect.

Although it flies in the face of my own hacker mentality and ethos, I now find myself appreciating the structure in each of these virtual environments as I spend more and more time within each virtual world. My earliest experiences with *World of Warcraft* (both at the start of this project's observation period and during my initial experiences before this study) were incredibly scattered and unengaging. As I noted in my discussion of the dungeon finder system, some days I spent hours trying to gather together a group to complete one dungeon, only to have to abandon the enterprise as the real world intruded in on my digital experiences. However, the newfound simplicity brought about by newly redesigned experiences within *World of Warcraft* lead me to engage with the game more fully. As much as I initially thought that I might loathe the simplicity and "mindlessness" of *Farmville*, I found myself appreciating the ease with which I could quickly jump into the game's world and the clear direction for my interactions with the game's virtual environment once in the virtual environment. While an open-ended experience may give players more choices, it makes it harder for players to align their individual interests.

Designed Experience and Virtual Communities

The tradeoff of accessibility at the expense of more complex functionality leads to the second implication. Looking at digital design and virtual world structure more broadly, this study gives us a new way to approach the core concept of virtual community. The ideas presented by this project can be used to

understand virtual community as a part of design experiences and the ways in which structure create shared experiences among a group of users. Put simply, digital design of a virtual world creates the kind of commonality and shared experiences that change a group of disparate users into a true virtual community. Previous understandings of virtual community have focused on the sharing of interests among all of the assembled group members. This project gives us a new way to approach this idea based on shared experience within the virtual space.

We can look to Paul and Philpott's (2011) previously cited example of the *World of Warcraft* player guild *Cardboard Tube Samurai* as an example of online identification in action. While in Paul and Philpott's case, the shift to focus on the in-game activity of raiding ultimately harmed the external identifications that lead to the formation of *Cardboard Tube Samurai*, we might also consider the role that structure and design can play in reshaping and reinforcing identifications created within the virtual environment. In my own experience as a member of a guild within *World of Warcraft*, I found my player guild strengthened and far more focused after *World of Warcraft*'s designers made changes to how guilds operate and gave guilds specific goals to work toward. I also found a real, greater sense of real-world friendship that came from interactions with my *Farmville* neighbors. I found myself feeling closer to friends as they helped me out, as in the case of Dave's use of an "unwither" on my dead crops. Through a process of mediated identification, players connect with each other through the common experiences encoded into a virtual environment. This identification extends beyond mere

personal connections or friendships to bind whole groups of users together into true virtual communities. By understanding how design leads to the creation of these common experiences, we can gain a better understanding of this “virtual consubstantiality” as a key factor in understanding the greater social dynamics that occur within mediated online groups.

Structuring Online Education

The third implication has broader impacts for the very core of what we do as college educators. Understanding the design of experience has broad implications for online teaching and pedagogy. With this understanding of digital design, we will be better able to structure our online classrooms and other virtual learning spaces in ways that are open and accessible for our students, as opposed to more closed-off and task-driven virtual environments presented by most online courses. By approaching the virtual classroom as a virtual environment, we can begin to understand how we can engineer certain behaviors into our ways of teaching online. After all, what is an online classroom if not a virtual environment that we create through our syllabi, the persona we adopt as professors and instructors, and the people we call our students to be in the space of our classrooms. We have choices in terms of how we design these virtual places. Are they digital spaces that we ask students to “attend” at certain times during the week? Or, are they a series of activities that we ask students to engage in and reach out to their community of digital peers as needed?

Answering these questions and examining how we design our virtual classrooms matters immensely for how our students choose to interact with the

virtual environments we create. We cannot bemoan a lack of student engagement with online learning if students are presented with a kind of “fire and forget” discussion forum where they have very little incentive to interact with one another. Instead we can learn from these highly engaging virtual environments and try to model the kinds of engaging behaviors that we want our students to enact.

For example, after several semesters of ongoing frustration over poor student interactions within online discussion forums, I chose to adopt a model for some discussions based upon my experiences in *World of Warcraft.* I realized the “pressures on play” that I had created within these forums were leading students to post uninterested and disengaged responses to my form prompts. In an attempt to create more of a connection I adopted a new “dungeon finder” model for my students’ online discussions, and asked students to work in peer-groups to discuss each discussion forum prompt. One group member was assigned to be the group’s leader (as a “dungeon guide” would be assigned by the dungeon finder) and that leader was then responsible for leading his or her group through the discussion at hand. Rather than 22 individual posts in a large class discussion, this created 4 or 5 smaller but more engaged small group discussions with better interaction. Under this new model, these students worked as a part of a smaller group, sharing a set of common experiences in the forums that were only reinforced by other class actives like peer-reviews and a group assignment. I would argue that array of group experiences worked to create identification among the students, and thus virtual consubstantiality among the

group members. In this case, a more focused small group experience stands in for the shared experience of inhabiting a classroom. In the future, a more systematic and sustained application of these concepts to online discussion and classrooms could open up new ways for students to better engage with each other and with the course material at hand.

Future Research Directions

When I set out at the beginning of this project, I had hoped to be able to do more than what I was able to fit into this dissertation. However, just trying to understand the power of virtual environment design in each of these immense virtual worlds quickly became the focus of this study. As such, there are several future directions in which this research could be taken.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, direction for expanding this project would be to build upon the quantitative work presented here with a targeted quantitative look at how players are actually interacting within each of these virtual environments. This project sought to understand how users were positioned by each virtual environment, but looking to actual interactions in a more systematic way would lead to a deeper understanding of the kinds of forces at work within each virtual world.

A second direction for expanding upon this project would be to conduct a similar examination of other, newer virtual environments and virtual world computer games. Several new games have been developed and released since this project began. I noted earlier that while *Farmville* and *World of Warcraft* remain important for understanding these broad computer game genres, they

have also seen decreases in their overall market share as new games have come online. Future projects may look at other social media games built upon the core principles of the *Farmville* model to see if these pressures play out in similar ways in similar virtual environments. Future studies could look to other newer MMORPGs to see if similar pressures to play the game are coded into the designed experiences of these games. Understanding the differences in how different virtual environments lead users to engage in other ways would only broaden our understanding of the design of experience and the pressures on play. Such a study would also allow us to explore if, and how, elements from these emblematic examples have become codified into a broader generic conventions of computer games and virtual environments.

Third, beyond these game-specific examinations, we might use the methods and models identified by this study to branch out of this project to look at other kinds of online interactions more generally. We could apply the study of designed experience to other online (non-recreational) environments. For example, this kind of study could be used to analyze a social media website as an online "environment" and the website design's influence on its users. Using such a method, we might gain some insight into why different social networking pages create different kinds of user content. We might examine how the "pinboard" based interface of the newer social media website *Pinterest* leads users to engage in new kinds of social networking behavior, or how *Facebook*'s decision to change the layout and functionality of user profiles with their new

"timeline" design may push users to use the website in new and different ways from the previous uses elicited by previous designs.

We might also use these methods to better understand a given online environment and to identify a set of parameters that would let us more easily succeed in matching up with a virtual environment's preferred uses. In a world where social networking is quickly becoming a powerful marketing tool, we might ask ourselves what it takes to be a successful communicator within an online setting. For example, how does the design and implementation of *Twitter*'s interface lead to certain kinds of uses as opposed to other uses. With this understanding, we could then ask what it would mean to "win" at *Twitter* as a social media "game" and how this understanding could position informed users over other users that are unfamiliar with these rules.

We could also use these methods to examine virtual online education as a virtual environment to be read and analyzed. By engaging in a systematic participant observation of our own created online environments, we can begin to get a sense of the kinds of interactions we call upon our students to create through the ways in which we structure the online environments of our classrooms, the roles was call upon on students to enact, and the position we adopt as the leader of our learning environments.

Finally, it is my hope that this project provides yet another link between game studies and rhetoric. It is my hope that future scholars can use this study as a crossover point between the study of situation, context, persuasion, and the study of digital life. While several academic disciplines have the ability to

interrogate and explain the ways in which games make meaning, few have rhetoric ability to examine the contextual understanding of that communication. When we can look beyond what is being said and instead see the context in which it is being said, we shall gain a richer and fuller appreciation for the role that design plays in all of our interactions, whether they be online or offline.

At the same time, I would also argue that this study has several things to show as to how rhetoric can be influenced and expanded by an understanding of game studies. Future research could easily adapt the kinds of gaming metaphors offered by the study as a means for understanding other kinds of online rhetorical interactions in a more generalized way. We might approach the study rhetoric of as “a game” that communicators play. Just as this study has shown the explanatory power of applying rhetorical theory to gaming, we might turn the project around and examine how gaming might help our understanding of rhetoric as a practice.

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