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The WoW Factor:

A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Sacred Things and Rituals in World of Warcraft

Sonja C. Sapach

Abstract

This paper describes the method of complete participant observation-style virtual ethnography and how it was used to study sacred objects and rituals in the virtual world of Azeroth, from the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Drawing heavily from the work of Hine (2000), Gold (1958), and Durkheim (1912), and utilizing a case study of the author's MA thesis titled *The WoW Factor: The Development of Social Solidarity in Azeroth*, this paper provides a detailed description of the unique challenges that a researcher must overcome when planning, and carrying out, an ethnographic study in an MMORPG. Key topics of discussion include: ethical considerations and concerns, recording observations through the use of video-capture and screen-shots, the importance of maintaining the proper balance between being an 'insider' and an 'outsider', and spatial and temporal displacement between the virtual and the real.

Keywords: virtual ethnography, World of Warcraft, social solidarity, MMORPG

Introduction

"The battle is about to begin. Five strangers who have been randomly, but willingly, thrown together are preparing to fight together though the Halls of Origination in the ancient desert of Uldum. Our heroic group is led by a well armored warrior, who is built to draw attention and damage away from the three weaker damage dealers. As a priest, and designated healer, I am tasked with keeping everyone alive through the use of the various spells that I have learned over the course of my long journey. Even more important than my role as a healer, is my role as a one of five research assistants for a participant observation-style virtual ethnography being conducted by the author of this paper. While keeping other heroes alive during epic battles throughout Azeroth, I am also observing how they interact with each other, listening to how they communicate, and learning the social rules of

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each situation that I find myself in. My name is Lenoraven. I am an Undead, discipline spec priest, an adventurer, and an avatar in the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*)." (Lenoraven 2015)

Conducting an ethnographic study of virtual worlds involves multiple factors that complicate traditional ethnographic research, for example the above mentioned use of in-game avatars as research assistants. Utilizing a case study of my master's thesis titled *The WoW Factor: The Development of Social Solidarity in Azeroth* (2013) as a foundation, I will discuss many of the unique challenges that face a researcher when planning, and carrying out, an ethnographic study in an MMORPG. Through a detailed description of the methodological approach of in-game, complete participant observation-style (CPO), virtual ethnographic researchⁱⁱⁱ, this paper aims to provide a set of guidelines and considerations that should be included in the process of planning and conducting an ethnographic study of social behaviors and ideas in virtual, social worlds. I would like to note that I am working under the assumption that the reader has as a basic understanding of traditional ethnographic research, and I will be focusing specifically on the unique characteristics of CPO ethnographic research that takes place solely within video game worlds.

I am writing this paper from the perspective of a sociologist who is interested in the development of social solidarity through ritualized, collective play in virtual worlds. As the focus of this paper is a case study of my thesis, a brief overview of the theories I used will be helpful in setting the scene. I will begin the next section by talking about Émile Durkheim's approach to the sociological study of religion in order to argue that we can successfully study the essential forms of religious behavior in video games, without the need to reference real-world religions, through an examination of sacred things and the rituals that surround them. The next section will also explore the existing

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methodological literature around conducting virtual ethnographic research on the internet with a focus on the key ideas that are specifically relevant to the study of social behavior within video games.

Before moving forward, it is important to note that there are many great examples of participant-observation ethnographic research in video game words that explore the culture and practices of the players from within the game. Nardi (2010), Bainbridge (2010), and Chen (2012) are particularly good examples of researchers who have conducted research through their *WoW* avatars. Nardi (2010) and Bainbridge (2010) both conducted lengthy ethnographies of *WoW*. Nardi focused on providing detailed analyses of the player cultures while Bainbridge focused on understanding the virtual world as a whole, both explored diverse topics such as gender, religion, and economics. The point of difference in this paper is that I am outlining a methodological approach that focuses specifically on a style of CPO that is aimed at answering a specific question about in-game behaviors as opposed to a broader ethnography that acknowledges the real world characteristics of the players themselves. I will expand on this difference throughout the rest of the paper.

Literature Review

Studying Religion in the Magic Circle

In the book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, sociologist Émile Durkheim (1912) set out to study the social fact of religion *sui generis*, in other words, in its most fundamental form. In order to accomplish this task, Durkheim elected to conduct an ethnographic study of "the most primitive and simple religion which is actually known" (Durkheim 1912, 2) which, he argued, allowed him to work through many of the methodological issues surrounding the study of religion. He wanted to look for the

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origins and fundamental mechanisms behind religion as a social behavior common in all social situations, without looking at explicit definitions of religion as outlined by any one individual or group of individuals. My approach to studying rituals and solidarity in video games takes as its starting point Durkheim's approach to the sociological study of religion as something that exists above and beyond any specific individual understanding or cultural example.

Durkheim divides the type of beliefs one can hold into two opposing categories, the sacred and the profane. Sacred things represent socially shared meanings that are held to be worthy of protection and isolation. As Durkheim (1912, 37) states,

"by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred."

The sacred is a collectively created and understood thing that exists apart from any single individual; it represents a socially meaningful concept or action. Durkheim (1912, 41) says that

"rites (rituals) are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects."

Because the sacred is a socially created representation of the extraordinary, the rituals involved with the experience of the sacred are also socially created. A sacred space is a socially created, conceptual place, in which the ritualized experience of the sacred occurs. Entering this space represents a conscious recognition that participation in a ritual has begun. It need not be a physical space; it simply represents a shared, social acknowledgment of the boundaries of the ritual^{iv}.

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In order to make the conceptual link between sacred things, rituals, sacred spaces, and video games, we need to briefly draw on theories of play and game design. In his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* Huizinga (1950, 13) states that play is

"a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly...It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner."

Players engaging in the social action of play must enter what Huizinga calls the magic circle. He draws a comparison between the magic circle of play and the sacred spaces inside which religious rituals occur. It is a socially created, conceptual space that must be voluntarily entered in order to signify participation in the play action. Within the circle, specific rules, based on the collective beliefs of the participants, must be adhered to. To break the rules is to disengage from the play activity.

In their book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Salen and Zimmerman (2003, 95) provide us with a game design perspective on sacred space:

"As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility."

By crossing into the magic circle represented by the virtual world, players make the transition into a sacred space. By observing breaches in acceptable behavior, those that result in a break in the magic circle, an attempt can be made to analyze and articulate the rituals that maintain the magic circle – the observation of infractions can help define more clearly the details of the rules being broken.

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To summarize, I approach the study of religion in video games from the perspective of a researcher who is interested in learning about the rituals, and sacred things, that socially evolve out of collective play between communities of players who have actively entered the magic circle of the video game. CPO, where the researcher enters the game as a player, provides access to the sacred space where the observation of breaches can provide data that can allow for the analysis of the rituals and sacred things that have been developed by the community of players. This emphasis on the social development of the rituals and sacred things leads to an important point, and another argument in favor of immersion in the game as a researcher: sacred things and the rules surrounding them are not created on purpose by game designers, so they are not something that can be studied through an external reading of the game. The choice to follow the methodological approach to which I will now turn involves understanding that the data that the researcher seeks cannot be found outside of the game world but instead must be experienced by an active participant with inside knowledge of the game culture.

Participant Observation - Insider vs. Outsider

The key characteristic that defines participant observation is the level of involvement/immersion that the researcher undertakes. While some forms of qualitative or ethnographic research can be done and written from a third-person perspective, with the researcher as an obvious outsider who is looking-in and reporting on what they see, participant observation typically occurs from a first-person perspective. Gold (1958) outlines a typology of participant observer roles: the Complete Participant, the Participant-as-Observer, the Observer-as-Participant, and the Complete Observer. In order to successfully observe the breaches noted above, I argue that the researcher must take on the role of the complete participant who is fully immersed in the setting

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they are studying. They must take on the role of an insider, and collect data covertly, without alerting others to their presence. Gold (1958, 219) states that

"The true identity and purpose of the complete participant in field research are not known to those whom he observes. He interacts with them as naturally as possible in whatever areas of their living interest him and are accessible to him as situations in which he can play, or learn to play, requisite day-to-day roles successfully."

CPO involves intense, personal involvement with the people, places, and activities being studied. It is important to acknowledge the caution with which one must proceed when taking on the role of complete participant. Gold (1958, 220) stresses that

"a complete participant must continually remind himself that, above all, he is there as an observer: this is his primary role."

Such a role demands that the researcher refrains from developing an emotional attachment to, or significantly personal interest in, the culture being studied^v. While it is inevitable that some attachment and involvement will develop, the researcher must remember their primary role in order to act as safely and ethically as possible.

There is a fine line between insider and outsider that the researcher must walk during a CPO virtual ethnography. As a complete participant, the researcher needs to learn how to skillfully play the game in order to avoid detection as an outsider. They need to learn the argot and expected in-game behaviors while working toward the successful completion of quests alongside other players. They need to play the game with sufficient skill to avoid drawing unwanted attention to themselves. As an insider, the researcher is inevitably going to make social connections, aid and be aided by other players, and share in the emotional collective effervescence linked to the successful completion of a challenging boss battle or series of quests. Through their participation,

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the researcher will impact the culture that they are observing. They will join groups, make allies and enemies, and depending on their skill, may significantly impact the outcome of an important battle^{vi}. This sort of impact is not only acceptable, but I would argue integral to a successful CPO virtual ethnography.

Remaining an outsider involves two key things: gathering valid data and avoiding harm. The researcher needs to be able to analyze the data from an emotionally neutral, critical perspective. As with any other qualitative research, the ultimate goal is to analyze and report on the data in a way that directly addresses the research question and objectives. More importantly, the data needs to be gathered in a way that causes minimal harm to both the participants and the researcher. Due to the complex nature of the issue of harm, I will return to this subject in the next section where I discuss the ethical consideration of the methodology.

Hine's Virtual Ethnography

Christine Hine wrote her book *Virtual Ethnography* in 2000 in order to address the ways in which new communication technologies affect traditional embodied ethnography and the nature of qualitative research^{vii}. She states that

"The approach to ethnography which is described here is intended to do justice to the richness and complexity of the internet and also to advocate experimentation within the genre as a response to novel situations." (Hine 2000, 13)

The increased ease with which we can interact, our ability to transcend traditional boundaries of time and space, fundamentally changes the ways in which we can undertake ethnographic study.

When conducting a virtual ethnography, Hine argues that the researcher needs to

recognize an altered conception of time and space. She reminds us that a successful virtual ethnography involves re-thinking our concept of the field site. Although a specific virtual world may technically be considered to be a place or field site, it is important to remember that a virtual ethnography is in fact "multi-sited." (Hine 2000, 64) The key to a virtual ethnography is to sustain the same presence that the typical inhabitant does. Each and every player is required to login to the game in order to participate. Every player's physical body is located in a separate location in the realworld, with travel to, and immersion in, the virtual world primarily dependent on the interaction between the mind and the technology. This is not to say however, that our physical bodies are not involved in our participation. The game requires us to actively use our hands to type and operate the mouse and/or other peripherals. We use our eyes to observe our surroundings and commonly use our ears to listen not only to the background music and sound effects, but also to participate in voice-chat with other inhabitants. A valid ethnographic study of a video game-world must include reference to both the separation of, and the intimate connection between, mind and body, and how this mind/body distinction operates differently in the virtual world than it does in the real one.

The mind/body distinction is also addressed when we consider the notion of boundaries. "Boundaries are not assumed *a priori* but explored through the course of the ethnography." (Hine 2000, 64) While it is important to let go of a fixed concept of spatial boundaries and locations, certain boundaries must be drawn in order to acknowledge the separation between virtual-life and real-life. When conducting ethnography in an MMORPG, it is of utmost importance to recognize that the behaviors, interactions, and cultural connections created in-game may differ significantly from what any one participant may do in real life. The virtual world allows us to immerse

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ourselves in situations that remove us from many of the limitations of real life; physical, psychological, and social barriers that exist in reality are typically eliminated in virtuality. Therefore, when conducting research online, we must remain cognizant that while what we observe may be true in the virtual world, further connections must be drawn, and further research done, before attempting to carry the findings over into the real-world.

Moving from spatial to temporal considerations, unlike ethnography that takes place in a real physical space, a virtual ethnography has the added element of a built-in pause button. Researchers are able to completely remove themselves from the field site without damaging their immersion or insider status. They are able to step away from the game in order to interact with their colleagues, family and friends, without jeopardizing their fieldwork. It is important to keep in mind, as mentioned above, that this does not detract from the validity of the study, as the inhabitants of the world are able to take the same breaks and escape from the game-world in similar ways. Additionally, Hine (2000, 65) reminds us that "virtual ethnography is necessarily plural." Due to the ever-changing, consistent evolution of virtual worlds, any attempt to document a holistic account of the culture of a game-world is unrealistic. In an MMORPG like WoW, players actively come and go, rules are often updated, graphics advance, and expansions that alter the nature of the world itself are released, introducing new cultures, histories, challenges, rules, and game mechanics. When doing a virtual ethnography the researcher needs to acknowledge that cultural shifts can occur quite rapidly, potentially requiring frequent re-visits and continual comparisons to previous studies.

Method

One of the primary goals of ethnographic research is to learn about a group or culture through observations of, and discussions with, its members. The data that the researcher

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seeks does not exist in a concrete, easily defined form but is based on the people, and the environments being studied. Virtual ethnographic research requires the ability to adapt to unpredictable situations and dynamic people, environments, and cultures. This sort of flexibility is in-fact a requirement according to Pearce (2009, 55) who says

"the ludic environments of online games are characteristically open-ended, nonlinear, and participatory, unpredictable and labile, and thus require an agile and responsive approach to research."

The steps outlined below are designed to be as specific as possible given the complexity of the video game industry and fragility of video game cultures^{viii}. The methodological approach being outlined here is best suited for research questions that seek to investigate some aspect of player centered cultural phenomena, such as religion, within an MMORPG.

Step 1: Who, Where, and When?

Participants

Determining who your participants are is largely out of your control. The goal here is not so much to define the specific characteristics of the participants you want to study as much as it is to explicitly acknowledge the wide range of characteristics that they share as players, while recognizing how their real-world personalities, while relevant in the grand scheme of things, are irrelevant to the methodological approach being outlined here. As discussed above, the data that the researcher is seeking through this method is exclusively relevant to the virtual world of the specific game that they are studying. The goal is to learn about the culture and behaviors of players within the game-world, which by extension means that the real-world characteristics and behaviors of the players can not, and should not, be used to answer the research question. This argument is made quite well by Boellstorff (2010) in his book *Coming of Age in Second Life* which argues

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that in-game social structures and behaviors develop separately from real-world ones, and must be studied in a way that acknowledges that separation. Again, I fully acknowledge that the players themselves are not divisible. When I enter the game as Lenoraven the priest, no matter how immersed in the game I am, I still bring Sonja the person with me. However, a researcher conducting the type of study that I am outlining here is only interested in how Lenoraven behaves and interacts in the game world. Facts about Sonja, such as age, education, socioeconomic status, cultural interests, physical abilities, etc., may contribute to how Sonja plays the game, but are not important in understanding how Lenoraven behaves. So, while real-world statistics describing the demographics of the players of the game may be important to discuss in relation to the results of your study, they do not come into play during the actual ethnographic field work. This stands in contrast to Nardi (2010) who traveled to China to observe players as they played in real life, and Dibbell (1998) whose detailed analysis of the LambdaMOO community frequently drew attention to both the virtual and real lives of the participants.

Each game world will have different player-character characteristics including but not limited to races, classes, genders, political affiliations, mythologies, group roles, and skill trees. In a large game like *WoW*, the researcher must decide which populations of player-characters they are interested in studying and make note of the populations that they do not. For example, Lenoraven is a member of the Undead race, which means that she is automatically affiliated with the political faction known as the Horde, comprised of approximately half of the population of Azeroth. Verbal communication between characters is limited to those players who are in the same faction. Characters of the opposite faction speak a different in-game language and therefore cannot speak to, directly trade with, or actively participate in quests with the opposing faction. When I

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conduct research through Lenoraven, I need to actively recognize that my participants are limited to a certain population of player characters within the game.

A final point to be made about participants, is the additional need for the researcher to determine which character(s) they will play. There is a delicate balance between playing as many races and classes as possible in an attempt to take on multiple perspectives, and focusing on the development of a few select characters. As of this writing, Lenoraven the priest is currently a level 91 character. I have spent hundreds of hours advancing her through the game, learning how to effectively play the role of a healer, and gaining insights into the Horde and Undead mythologies. She may have a somewhat limited perspective in the grand scheme of the game, but she is able to play alongside highly skilled players who have been immersed in the culture for a long time^x. I have other, lower-level research assistants that were created in an attempt to participate in the Alliance faction but unfortunately, in a game that has been around as long as *WoW*, there are not many players who are active at low levels. It is up to the researcher to determine and justify how they will participate in the game based on the unique nature of the game, the existing skills of the researcher in that particular game, and the goals of the ethnography.

The Field Site

According to Grieve (2010, 39)

"The myth of the ethnographic field as a discreet, bounded geographical local is proving to be increasingly outdated and untenable as globalization and mediation blur the boundary between 'here' and 'there'. In fact, a 'field site' can no longer be seen merely as a physical location, but rather must be viewed as the intersection between people, practices, and shifting terrains, both physical and virtual."

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When conducting a virtual ethnography within a video game the field site is determined by the game mechanics. The game designers created the environments within the game and have defined the rules surrounding player interactions within and with the environment. It is up to the researcher, again based on the research question and objectives, to determine how much detail of the game world is relevant to the study. Returning to Hine (2000) and as emphasized by Grieve (2010), the field site actually has multiple layers that must be considered. In addition to the in-game location of the players' avatars, the researcher must consider the nature of the technology being used to participate in the game world.

Turning again to *WoW*, I consider myself to be in the field whenever I am actively logged into the game and actively playing. This requires me to be at a computer that is connected to the internet, and has all of the software and hardware required to run the game. I also need to make sure that I have an active paid subscription to the game and the game servers themselves need to be active. I must also acknowledge that my participants all have the same environmental requirements. Behind each avatar is a human who requires food, sleep, and bathroom breaks: a person who may live in a different time-zone, who cannot always afford to maintain their subscription or internet connection, and who may have unseen influences altering their behavior^{xi}.

Timeline

In addition to the challenging interpersonal and spatial considerations that must be made when conducting a virtual ethnography, temporal issues also come into play. As with any research plan, the length of time in the field and specific dates and deadlines for data gathering and analysis must be laid out. The dynamic and multi-layered nature of the video game field site however, also requires the researcher to pay attention to

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game-world accessibility, participant time-zone differences, and the impact of real-world events on player and researcher access to the game. As mentioned above, video games and virtual worlds are relatively unstable and a successful virtual ethnography requires the researcher to anticipate and adapt to unpredictable temporal disruptions.

Step 2: Ethics

Returning to the concept of harm, there are many tricky ethical issues that must be considered when conducting this type of research. As a complete participant observer, the researcher is engaging in a form of deception, though not necessarily an active one. The researcher is careful to hide the fact that they are conducting research through their ability to fully participate in the culture. On the surface, this could be considered a privacy issue, as the participants are logging into the game from private, unidentified locations. I was however, careful to note above that this methodological approach is designed to research the in-game behavior of player-characters, not of their real-world counterparts. I would argue then, that there is actually less deception occurring in the virtual ethnography as both the researcher and the participants are separated and rendered practically anonymous through their avatars.

Returning to the issue of harm touched on previously, virtual worlds introduce some unique types of harm that must be considered. Terms like spamming, trolling, and griefing are common online and ultimately refer to forms of virtual harassment. When rendered relatively anonymous, it becomes easier for people to use vulgar language, make racial and sexual slurs, and bully fellow players. It is important, therefore, for the researcher to educate themselves about the unique use of language within the game that they are studying. For example, the term 'noob' is generally, but not always, considered to be a slur against 'weak' players. As a researcher, I actively avoid using the

term due to its potential to be interpreted as an attack, despite the fact that I have seen it used in playful forms as well. Along the same lines, the researcher needs to be aware of the potential to be on the receiving end of what can often be seen as brutal verbal attacks. In order to act as an ethical complete participant, the researcher needs to prepare to be on the receiving end of harmful comments and must be willing to log out of the game if they begin experiencing actual harm as a result.

The final ethical issue that I want to address involves the direct influence of the researcher on the research object. It is impossible to conduct this type of research without influencing the participants and the culture in some way. As a complete participant, it is necessary to actively participate in social activities in the game. As mentioned in a footnote above, Lenoraven has been responsible for the lives and deaths of many fellow adventurers. My participation as a player has a direct impact on the success and failure of other players in the game. This however, is true for all players in an MMORPG. Even a small action like killing a certain monster who is required for a quest can force another player to have to wait for the monster to respawn^{xii} before they can move forward. The researcher needs to be cognizant of the impact that they are having on the game and the participants without limiting their ability to completely participate, as long as they are not causing real-world harm.

Step 3: Field Work

Fundamental to conducting any form of fieldwork are the methods used to record the various observations made throughout. While actively in the field, the researcher needs to have a set of guidelines prepared surrounding what data they hope to gather, and how they plan to record it accurately and efficiently. The central challenge that is unique to a virtual ethnography is that the researcher needs to be playing the game in order to



be a complete participant. A game like *WoW* typically involves mastering a complex combination of keyboard and mouse movements. Additionally, a large majority of the data that the researcher is interested in may only be available during intense battle situations where split second reactions and intense immersion are required. The researcher is put at a distinct disadvantage if they want to take notes during a battle.

Fortunately, there are a few tools that can prove to be useful. A voice recorder may be helpful in providing a hands-free way to record observations orally, if not participating in live voice chat with the other players. Most games have a built-in screen-capture function that takes a snapshot of the screen and then saves it to a designated file. This can be particularly useful for capturing important chat messages and for providing visual context to certain observations. The primary disadvantage is that the researcher needs to press a certain button every time they want to capture a screenshot. During my research, I was able to master the use of the screen-capture button, incorporating it into my gameplay technique. Finally, there is video-capture software that can record chunks of gameplay to be reviewed later. Video-capture presents two challenges however, storage space, and review time. Videos take up a large amount of disk space, so you need to have the storage capacity to store them all. The researcher will also eventually have to watch the videos in order to make more detailed notes. If 100 hours of game-play were recorded, then there is 100 hours of video to watch and code.

Step 4: Coding and Analysis

There is not much to say here as the coding and analysis of data is really no different from a traditional ethnography. There are however, a few things to keep in mind. Based on the research question and objectives, it may be important pay particular attention to which research assistant character was used to gather which data. For example, in the

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case study outlined below, I noted that Lenoraven the priest was the primary source of my data as there were minimal observations made by my four other assistants due to their low levels. Also, it is important to note if new versions^{xiv} of the game were released during or after field work in order to note which version of the game your research is addressing. To put it succinctly, it is necessary to keep in mind all of the unique characteristics of a virtual ethnography, and to make note of them when applicable.

Case Study

Between August 23, 2012 and December 23, 2012, I conducted a CPO virtual ethnography in Azeroth, the setting of the MMORPG *WoW*, in order to gather data for my MA thesis. The goal of the thesis was to satisfy the following three objectives:

- 1) Identify and define the objects, rules and behaviors considered to be *sacred* by active citizens of Azeroth (*WoW*) those objects, rules, and behaviors that are socially expected to be protected and followed.
- Develop an understanding of the social connections created during game play, specifically related to shared goals and a shared understanding of the rules dictating appropriate behaviors surrounding sacred things.
- 3) Determine if and how participation in the virtual world of Azeroth fits into current theoretical understandings of play, and ritual, in relation to the creation of social solidarity.

The theoretical basis for the thesis drew largely from Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms* of the Religious Life as outlined above. Ultimately, I hypothesized that shared play in virtual worlds results in the creation of sacred objects, ideas, and behaviors, around which shared rituals develop, resulting in the creation and maintenance of trust, respect, and solidarity.

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Throughout the study, immersion in the field occurred at various times on a variety of days of the week. As an experienced player, I did not want to introduce an artificial schedule into the game-play experience. In an attempt to interact with/witness the interactions of a wide variety of players and to obtain the widest range of 'random' observations, I avoided following a detailed, patterned schedule. The average amount of time spent in the field was 25 hours per week and totaled 407 hours in all. The activities that I participated in included solo questing, leveling, social interactions through guild chat, 5-man randoms dungeon runs, guild runs of regular and heroic instances, and casual observation in highly populated areas such as cities. During my fieldwork, I played the game as a knowledgeable and skilled player. I employed the behaviors and argot necessary to pass as a true citizen of Azeroth. I used my history and prior experiences with *WoW* to covertly observe the actions of others without revealing my additional role of researcher.

Upon completion of my field work, I moved into data analysis which first involved organizing the data into reasonable chunks. Over the 407 hours of fieldwork, I captured 1842 individual screenshots. These screenshots were primarily focused on recording text, however, they also provided visual cues to help me remember the context of the situations. I then divided the screenshots into four categories based on the content of the chat-boxes and/or the context of any visual, non-verbal interactions. I then moved on to open coding where I viewed each screenshot and took general notes about the content, recording any trends, distinct behaviors, patterns of speech, and other notable occurrences. My notes outlined specific actions and quotes and included intermittent, generalized commentaries of my first impressions. Once complete, I reviewed the notes and began to write key words and ideas in the margins – things such as 'breach', 'language', 'banter', 'helping', and 'complaining'. Following this, I performed a closed

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coding session looking for specific indicators of social solidarity, ritual behavior, and sacred things. I also captured 364.34 minutes of video which was coded in a similar manner as the screenshots. These videos were particularly valuable in allowing me to notice the length of time a group would go without speaking, and how well players were performing their roles. The use of video also allowed me to remain immersed in game-play without hyper-focusing on capturing all of the screenshots.

During my research, I successfully identified a range of specific objects and symbols that are the primary focus of ritualized group behavior in Azeroth. Faction symbols, titles, tabards, mounts, pets, and gear are sacred things that have socially created meanings for *WoW* players.

Discussion

One of the biggest benefits of this method is that it has at its foundation a methodological approach that has a long history of being employed to study people and cultures across a wide range of disciplines. There is a plethora of information on ethnographic research methods available to help researchers design their own projects. For the purposes of this paper, I have only focused on a very specific formulation of the methodology in order to promote its use in the study of social behaviors in video games.

In order to avoid repeating everything that you have read up to this point, I only want to summarize two key points that can both be seen as benefits and limitations to this method. First, this method, as described in this paper, is only intended to study in-game player cultures, exclusive from the real-world. This is beneficial in that it allows researchers to learn about how player cultures develop and flourish or fall in the very



specific and measurable spaces of video games. The down side is that the results are limited to the game that the research is conducted in, in the form that the game existed at the time. Two years have passed since my thesis and *WoW* has changed significantly in that time. I am no longer certain that my results are relevant due to these changes. Additionally, I cannot be certain if my results carry over into other MMORPGs. I would have to conduct field research in a completely different game to see if my observations remained valid across games.

The second point that I want to make is that the altered relationships between mind and body, and time and space discussed above requires anyone employing this method to walk a fine line. On the one hand, virtual ethnographic research allows the researcher to 'work from home', taking breaks and living their own lives as needed/wanted. They can choose when to enter the field, how much time they want to invest, and are able to leave the game with the simple click of a button. On the other hand, the method has the potential to be dismissed as simply 'playing games' without adequate explanation and attention to detail when reporting results.

Conclusion

Using a CPO virtual ethnography to study player-characters and player-cultures within the boundaries of specific video games can provide a great deal of insight into both the nature of social interactions and the development of cultures in online worlds. This is a method that needs to be used with caution in that the researcher needs to remain constantly aware of their role as complete participant and of the limited scope of the questions that their observations can validly address.

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i Treating avatars as research assistants does appear in the literature; Celia Pearce in fact co-authored her book *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (2009) with her avatar Artemesia.

ii ©2004 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved. World of Warcraft, Warcraft and Blizzard Entertainment are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in the U.S. and/or other countries.

iii Unless otherwise stated I will refer to the methodological approach being discussed as virtual ethnography with the assumption that it involves complete participant observation.

iv The casting of the circle performed by Wiccan practitioners provides a good conceptual example of a sacred space as a product of energy that defines the ritual area. (Cunningham 1999, 55-58).

v The challenges of emotional involvement are well documented by Dibbell (1998) and also pointed to by Pearce (2009).

vi As a healer, Lenoraven has been responsible for entire groups dying repeatedly, contributing to the failure of many groups who spent hours attempting to conquer a certain dungeon. On the flip side however, she has also been responsible for the success of many groups through her skillful healing. vii As noted previously, there have been many, very well conducted virtual ethnographies since Hine. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on Hine as *Virtual Ethnography* was the foundation of my methodological approach to the case study being examined here.

viii For a good example of this, see Pearce 2009.

ix For a detailed discussion about virtual embodiment see Grieve's (2010) ethnographic study of Buddhism in *Second Life*.

x Chen (2012) and Nardi (2010) both followed the approach of using a few, highly developed avatars in order to fully immerse in the player culture.

xi Specific examples from my research include a cat jumping on the keyboard, a smoke alarm going off while I had something simmering in the oven, and an unexpected but urgent phone call in the middle of an important battle.

xii When the monster comes back to life after a short period of time.

xiii The software I used during my field research was FRAPS. More information can be found at www.fraps.com, accessed 29 August, 2015.

xiv Patches and/or expansion packs.