Bridging the Gap
How Offline Relationships Affect Online Sociality in World of Warcraft

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Introduction

Like most of his friends, Adalec woke up each morning in an inn. This particular inn was in an outpost town known to its inhabitants as the Crossroads. To the north, he could follow the road to Orgrimmar, an imposing fortress-city that contained shops, banks, trainers, and – most importantly – an auction house. To the south west, he might travel to Thunder Bluff, a city situated on top of a series of majestic mesas. But today, his business was going to keep him around the Crossroads. In the previous day’s travels he had damaged his staff and run out of healing potions. Before setting out for the day, he stopped by the blacksmith, who repaired his equipment, for a price. To restock his potions, he combined bruiseweed and briarthorn, common herbs found in the area, to create new healing potions. Thus prepared, Adalec was ready to start his day’s work.

All good days started with good quests, though. He wasn’t in the mood for indiscriminately thinning out the local lion population (a popular local pastime); he wanted some direction. He checked his quest log. Yesterday, he had gone after a group of kleptomaniacal raptors who had stolen a shipment of silver that had been earmarked to pay the Crossroads’ guards. Now, he had been tasked to go finish the job and retrieve the stolen silver from the raptors’ nest.

This wasn’t something he could do alone. He’d had a hard enough time taking on individual raptors the day before, and he knew he would need help to deal with the entire nest. Luckily, help was close by. Adalec was a member of a guild called Fame and Fortune. Using his special connection to other guild members, he described his situation to his guildmates, who were themselves undertaking quests all around the continent. One of them, named Segdish, happened to be nearby, and he had some time to kill. He met up with Adalec
outside the Crossroads to help him clear out the raptor nest.

Segdish was an imposing figure. Unlike Adalec, he was a veteran adventurer who had traveled extensively. He carried a pair of glowing swords, one red and one blue. His armor gleamed in the Barrens’ sun. Adalec got the impression that Segdish could have completed this quest with his eyes closed.

Nevertheless, the pair set out. Adalec knew where he was going from the previous day’s adventures. They ran into a handful of local fauna, which mostly ignored the pair. When they arrived at the raptor nest, they set to work. Adalec lured the raptors out a few at a time, and Segdish would deal the killing blows. They quickly reached the heart of the nest, Adalec retrieved the silver, as well as a handful of magical items in a nearby crate. Quest complete, they headed back to the Crossroads to return the stolen goods and get the reward. When they reach the crossroads, Adalec thanked Segdish for his help. Segdish humbly accepts his thanks and heads off to a quest of his own.

Adalec figured this is a good time to sell off some of the magical items he’s collected in his travels. He hopped on a windrider, which took him directly to Orgrimmar, the capital city to the north. As usual, Orgrimmar is packed. There are hundreds of adventurers wandering its streets, and most of them have ended up standing inside or in front of the auction house. This building is the heart of the nation’s economy. The vast majority of goods found in the world are bought and sold in this building. Today, Adalec is selling. He opens his bags to see what he has that other people might like to buy. He had a pair of boots that increase the wearer’s health and a shield that makes its holder more agile. He checked the prices of similarly powerful items and deposited a small amount to cover the listing fee for his items.
In Orgrimmar, it is quite common for citizens to rest in public areas, and so Adalec felt quite comfortable going to sleep outside the auction house. He knew it would be a while before his items have sold, and wanted to be fully rested for tomorrow’s adventures.

**Games, Culture, and Sociality**

This story, while apparently an uninspired simulacrum of the stories told by fantasy authors since J. R. R. Tolkein’s novels, is interesting because it is not simply fiction. Adalec’s story is my story, played out a world called *World of Warcraft*. Millions of people around the world regularly spend times in these worlds, using their computers to connect them with other people inhabiting that same world. Inside these worlds, players invent characters who are adventurers who face dragons and monsters, triumphing using magic and bravery. These worlds are sold to consumers as, simply, “massively multiplayer online role playing games.” We refer to these worlds as games, and the people who inhabit them as players, and there is a grain of truth to that. However, to understand it, we need to think more critically about what it means to play.

Salen and Zimmerman engaged with this question in their seminal book, titled *Rules of Play*. While ostensibly about designing games, their book begins with an attempt to describe “meaningful play,” to which the games they design can aspire. In their estimation,

> **Meaningful play** in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designated system of a game and

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the system responds to the action. The *meaning* of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome.2

Thus games provide a semiotic structure in which the actions of players can be interpreted based on their outcomes within the game system. And, indeed, this is partly the case in an online game like *World of Warcraft*; Segdish’s assistance in killing the raptors was a meaningful game action – the raptors died, giving up their stolen silver as a result. But there is something else going on here. What was the nature of Adalec’s connection to Segdish? Segdish’s response to Adalec’s plea was not itself meaningful within the game, though it led to actions that were. Thus, the tools that Salen and Zimmerman propose for thinking about play are part of what we need to understand Adalec’s story, but sufficient for fully understanding what happened.

Earlier, I described *World of Warcraft* as both a game and a world, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive descriptions. To consider the world aspects of *World of Warcraft*, I turn to a different field, anthropology, and consider the way in which anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes his conception of culture, and what it means to study culture.

The concept of culture I espouse … is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.3

Though Geertz is discussing meaning in culture, and not in play, he shares with Salen and Zimmerman an interest in the interpretation of action based on a web of significance. In games, that web of significance are the rules of the game

2 Salen and Zimmerman, p 34.
system, for Geertz, that web is culture. With games, those webs are typically not malleable (though in some situations the malleability of the rules is itself a game), but culture is a concept constructed by its actors. Still, there are parallels to the approaches of anthropologists understanding culture and designers understanding games, and both are important to understand the chimera that is this synthetic world – a combination of game and society as well as “real” and “virtual.”

Game designer Richard Bartle suggests we should think about synthetic worlds like World of Warcraft as, simply, “places. They may simulate abstractions of reality; they may be operated as a service; creating them may be an art; people may visit them to play games. Ultimately, though, they’re just a set of locations. Places.” Like physical places we are familiar with, they support all manner of assembly, performance, communication, and expression.

In this paper, I explore one area of sociality within the place that is World of Warcraft. In the past, various people have argued that synthetic worlds are emancipatory spaces in which people can anonymously act out identity and gender dramas. Psychologist Sherry Turkle quotes a MUD player in her 1995 book Life on the Screen, who describes synthetic worlds as a place where

“You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be.”

This sentiment is shared, to some extent, by journalist Julian Dibbell’s account of

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6 Ibid, p 184
life in *LambdaMOO*. With the exception of the so-called Power Elite, the powerful and influential characters in his story are self-made; Minnie with her incessant and incoherent politicking, the anarchistic and revolutionary HortonWho, Finn with his sex-enabled player class. Indeed, this was part of the early dream of synthetic worlds, that identity could be predicated on something other than real world money, power, reputation, or appearance. And, as Turkle, Dibbell, and others from that time period showed, that was often the case.

Yet, there were signs, even then, that this view of online identity might not last. In Dibbell’s story of HortonWho’s punishment, he realizes that “the line between [online] and [offline] was no more impermeable than the line between what happens inside our heads and what happens outside them.” More recently, economist Edward Castronova, who coined the term “synthetic world,” characterizes that boundary between the synthetic and real worlds as a “porous membrane.” The membrane specifies the domain in which certain physical rules apply, but “we find human society on ether side of the membrane, and since society is the ultimate locus of validation for all of our important shared notions – value, fact, emotion, meaning – we will find shared notions on either side as well.” Castronova is most concerned with the ramifications of the properties of this membrane in terms of political economy, and discusses them eloquently and accurately, but I am more interested in another aspect of that membrane. How do relationships move through the membrane? What effect do

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8 Dibbell, p87.
10 Ibid, p147
relationships created outside the membrane have on sociality inside the membrane?

In this paper, I describe the specific processes through which *World of Warcraft* players surround themselves by people whom they know outside of the game, how this affects the resolution of conflict within the game, and the ramifications that has for the interpretation of guild membership. Using ethnographic methods and the interpretive tools of anthropology, I show that not just is the membrane between the real and synthetic world porous in terms of political economy, but that relationships and identity have become portable as well, the result of which has been social structures built not on true anonymity, but on the varied patterns of existing relationships. These relationships can come from relationships independent of synthetic worlds, or from relationships created and maintained online.

These findings are similar to that of game researchers Jakobsson and Taylor. In their 2003 paper, they used their own experience playing *Everquest*, a game similar in structure to *World of Warcraft*, to illuminate the role that social networks play in synthetic worlds. Their key finding, based largely on anecdotal evidence, was that a character’s status was not simply related to that character’s power, but instead related to the social network available to that character’s player. I confirm their general findings that offline relationships are important in synthetic worlds, and go into more depth about how relationships from outside the world are imported into it and how those relationships affect guilds and

conflict resolution.

**Literature Review**

Synthetic worlds have been the subject of a quite a bit of research since the first MUD in 1978. While not its own discipline, the study of synthetic worlds has attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines. To situate myself in this area, I discuss some of the more important work in the field.

Game designer Richard Bartle, who co-wrote the first MUD, has captured some of the most important canonical understandings in synthetic world research, starting with his widely-cited paper on player motivations in synthetic worlds, loosely dividing players into four categories: killers, achievers, socializers, and explorers. Based on his experiences building and managing MUDs, he describes how these different player types interact with the world and why they enjoy spending time in the world. He also identifies the ways in which populations of different player types interact, for example he suggests that increasing the number of killer type players in a world will decrease the number of achiever type players, and the more explorers in a world, the more new explorer type players it will attract.

An early work to argue that meaningful sociality was taking place in synthetic worlds was the 1991 paper by game designers Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer. They focus on the meaning of the world to users, and the ways in which design decisions can have profound effects on sociality within the

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game. Habitat was of particular importance because it the first graphical synthetic world, and unlike most other synthetic worlds at the time, was a commercial venture in which users paid to spend time in the world. The authors wrestle with questions of immersion, player governance, and death – issues that are still quite relevant in modern synthetic worlds.

More recently, sociology student Nick Yee has taken another look at Bartle’s player types, using survey and statistical methodologies. He developed a survey with statements like “I like to say funny things in group/guild chat.” Respondents to the survey were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statement. Yee was hoping to group these motivations into motivation categories, which might map back to Bartle’s player types. Based on about 6700 responses, he identified five motivations: relationship, immersion, grief, achievement, and leadership. Players are characterized by a mix of these. They differ somewhat from Bartle’s findings, most notably that Yee did not find evidence of an explorer type motivation. Yee has also done quantitative (and some vaguely qualitative) work exploring a number of other issues in synthetic worlds. He has also worked with the Palo Alto Research Center on the PlayOn project, collecting data from World of Warcraft.

Markets inside synthetic worlds are the source of significant scholarly interest. In 2001, economist Edward Castronova published a paper on the economy of a then-popular synthetic world called Everquest. In that paper, he

estimated that *Everquest's* GNP per capita was “somewhere between that of Russia and Bulgaria.” The paper has been quite influential, and is currently the third most downloaded article on the Social Science Research Network website on which it was published. In November 2005, Castronova published a book describing some of the findings from his earlier paper, as well as a broader discussion of synthetic worlds (a phrase he coins and defends in the book) and their relationship with the real world.\(^\text{16}\) He argues convincingly that the value of money and items in synthetic worlds is real in precisely the same way that money is meaningful outside of synthetic worlds. As discussed earlier in this paper, the book argues that the boundaries between synthetic worlds and the real world are best characterized as a “porous membrane,” and describes how events in the real and synthetic worlds influence each other in terms of markets, politics, and law. While it has been a common understanding for some time that the boundaries between the synthetic and real worlds are not solid, Castronova’s book provides a broader view on the issue than has been previously articulated.

Other work has been done to study online communities more generally. Sociologist Barry Wellman has spent most of his career exploring community issues, and has published a wide range of papers about the role of online technology in society. In his 1997 paper titled “Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities,” he explores online communities in the way that sociologists have typically studied offline communities, and demonstrates how online communities are different than offline communities, but that they are not *a priori* a bad thing, that in fact there is significant evidence

that they play a positive role for many people. His findings about online communities generally are relevant to synthetic world work because they help to provide the scholarly motivation to studying sociality online in the first place.

Though other disciplines have been studying synthetic worlds for some time, there has been less attention from anthropologists. There have been a number of linguistic ethnographies interested in the text-based nature of early synthetic worlds\textsuperscript{17}\textsuperscript{18}\textsuperscript{19}, but only a few cultural ethnographies, which were particularly concerned with orienting the reader to the worlds in a general sense.\textsuperscript{20}\textsuperscript{21} Because synthetic worlds are social places, it seems that the tools of cultural anthropologists are particularly well suited to this field, and could add a vital perspective on life in a synthetic world that the quantitative tools of economists and sociologists are less effective at revealing.

**Background and Context**

Ethnographies are inherently reliant on context for their interpretation. An ethnography of *World of Warcraft* faces the challenge of trying to describe a world


in which the rules seem tantalizingly familiar: there are currency, markets, roads, houses, and horses that follow rules that are broadly like those in the real world. Yet there are other aspects of life in this synthetic world that are quite different. People often teleport from one place to another. When they die, they return as ghosts, and then are reborn when they find their body. It’s possible for people to talk to each other, anywhere in the world, without anyone noticing. Ultimately, this is not dissimilar from other ethnographies, in which readers must give up their own cultural understandings of how the world works to fully appreciate the understandings of another culture. I try to treat *World of Warcraft* in the same way, and encourage readers to shed their assumptions about computers, the Internet, and online games to fully appreciate what occurs in *World of Warcraft*.

**What is World of Warcraft?**

*World of Warcraft*, like many other game-worlds, inherits parts of its basic game structure from *Dungeons & Dragons*, a gaming system developed in mid 1970s. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, player characters had a variety of numbers, representing personal traits like strength, dexterity, and intelligence. As characters undertook quests and killed monsters, they kept track of their experience. When a character had accrued a certain amount of experience, they gained a level. Gaining a level entitled the character to increased personal characteristic statistics as well as new skills and abilities. A high level character is thus significantly more powerful than a low level character, and able to undertake more challenging quests. The amount of experience to advance to the

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next level is more than the amount required to advance to the previous level – it gets harder and harder to reach the next level as a character gains levels.

*World of Warcraft* merges those broad rules with a mythos shared by other games from the same publisher; a series of real time strategy games titled *Warcraft, Warcraft II*, and *Warcraft III*. The plot of these games told the story of the various races that inhabit the world and their long history of conflict, and borrows heavily from common fantasy convention. *World of Warcraft*’s story picks up after the *Warcraft III* story ends, and separates the major races in the game into two factions, The Horde (consisting of orcs, the undead, trolls, and a species of bipedal cows called tauren) and The Alliance (consisting of humans, elves, dwarves, and gnomes). While not currently involved in all out war, these two factions still quite antagonistic and conflict between them is encouraged. *World of Warcraft* is designed, developed, and published by Blizzard, a renowned game design company responsible for many other successful games including *Starcraft* and *Diablo I* and *II*. *World of Warcraft* is their first entry into the synthetic world market.

In *World of Warcraft*, the kinds of activities a character does in game can change dramatically as the character’s level changes. To simplify crudely, newer characters stick to quests, usually completing them alone. As they gain levels, the quests tend to get harder to complete alone, and characters will often form groups to make them easier. Between levels 20 and 30, a new kind of area, called instances, become available to characters. In these areas, small groups of characters (usually five) enter a particularly difficult area. Within the instance, they have a series of quests to complete. In most areas in *World of Warcraft*, there are other characters wandering the landscape. These characters can be helpful,
passive, or outright rude. In contrast, instances are only inhabited by one group of five characters at a time. If another group wants to play in the same instance, another copy of the area is created, and they also adventure in it alone. The monsters in these areas carry the most rare and powerful items.

Once a character reaches level 60, it can no longer accumulate experience points. Instead, level 60 characters tend to focus on the acquisition of powerful items, which come from the instances. Instances appropriate for higher-level players also tend to accommodate larger groups. The largest instances require groups of 40 characters to defeat the monsters inside. These large groups are called raids. High-level players interested in this aspect of the game will often attempt to complete the instance’s quests as often as possible – about once a week for the biggest instances. To promote success, groups of players often attempt the same instance with the same characters each time. In most cases, these characters are all members of the same guild. These instances can also be referred to as end-game instances, high-level instances, or raid instances.

Guilds in World of Warcraft are formal organizations of characters. Each character can only be a member of one guild at a time, and their guild membership is displayed underneath their name. Guild members also often wear a piece of clothing with the guild’s coat of arms on the front and back. A member of a guild can talk to any other member of the guild through a shared chat channel. Guilds can bestow ranks on their members, which can grant certain guild-related powers. Guilds are led by officers and the guild master. The ability to recruit new members to the guild, promote guild members, and kick characters out of the guild can be assigned to various members of the guild according to their rank. The role of guilds in sociality, and the ways in which
relationships from outside World of Warcraft affect guilds and sociality more generally will be discussed in depth in later sections.

**Why World of Warcraft?**

*World of Warcraft* is one of many synthetic worlds, and some particular features it make it worthy of study. First, there is the size aspect. *World of Warcraft* has substantially more North American subscribers than any other synthetic world. In late August 2005, *World of Warcraft’s* publisher announced they had reached 1 million subscribers in North America alone, with more than 4 million subscribers around the world.\(^{23}\) There are not definitive reports of subscriber numbers for all synthetic worlds, but according to one expert observer, this makes *World of Warcraft* one of the three biggest worlds, along with Lineage and Lineage II, both of which are more popular in Asia than the US.\(^{24}\) Because of its size, *World of Warcraft* represents the first major entry of a synthetic world onto the national cultural scene.

Size alone is not a sufficient reason to choose to study *World of Warcraft*, but its success may also have profound effects on the design of future worlds. Because synthetic worlds are now a time – and capital – intensive commercial endeavor, new worlds tend to inherit substantial design features from previous successful games. *World of Warcraft’s* success will almost certainly mean it has a substantial influence on the design of future worlds. While few would argue that

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World of Warcraft is revolutionary, its particular blend of features that try to make the game accessible and goal oriented, wrapped in a familiar mythos and distinctive visual style has proven to be quite attractive to players. Building an understanding of sociality in World of Warcraft will likely be valuable when looking at future game worlds.

**Methods**

Investigating sociality with ethnographic methods in a game world poses some challenges versus traditional offline ethnography or ethnography in a social world. First, there is the issue of levels. As characters gain experience (and their character gets numerically stronger), they move to different areas of the game world, are involved in different kinds of activities, and have different social structures. To gain access to these diverse experiences as a participant observer would mean investing a substantial amount of time in playing the game – it takes on average 480 hours of in-game time to reach level 60.\(^{25}\) Beyond that, it takes even more time to be strong enough and skilled enough to be accepted into the established guilds that go on raids. I had spent enough time in the game (on the order of 100 hours) before this project started to have a feel for the experience, but it would still require a substantial time investment to make it to level 60. While taking a character all the way to level 60 would no doubt be instructive (and fun), it would not be an efficient way to understand sociality and guilds in World of Warcraft.

Instead of online interviews, I focused on one-on-one offline interviews to

collect information. This format avoided the significant pitfalls of online ethnography, like maintaining anonymity and the frustration of conducting interviews in a text-based chat environment. What was lost in taking the interviews out of context was gained in the richness of the interviews themselves. The interviews were semi-structured around a protocol I prepared based on my research interests and limited experience playing the game. I took typed notes during the interview. In one phone interview, I recorded the interview and transcribed it later.

**Participant Profiles**

In all, five players were interviewed. They were all male, ranging in age from 19 to early 30’s. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms. I didn’t collect enough demographic data to claim that my interviewees are rigorously representative of users of synthetic worlds broadly as surveyed by Castronova\(^{26}\) or Yee\(^{27}\). Still, what data I do have suggests that they are in the right area. The mean age was about 22; lower than either Castronova or Yee’s, but close. Similarly, while I didn’t ask participants to report exactly how many hours they had played in the last 24 hours, they all reported that they played between 3 and 5 hours a day, making them slightly less active than the users in Castronova’s survey, but not significantly so. Thus my interviewees are broadly similar to the demographics of synthetic world users generally, and so their responses can be taken as somewhat representative of a wider audience.

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\(^{26}\) Castronova, 2005. p 60.

Aaron spends the most time playing *World of Warcraft* of the people I interviewed. Over the summer, he estimated he spent 20-30 hours a week playing, but only 10-15 hours a week when he’s at school – homework and other commitments cut down on his time to play. He has two primary characters, a level 60 warlock and a level 60 paladin. He has had a long and conflict-filled guild history, in which he has (as he tells it) played a central role in guiding his friends from guild to guild. He was also the most involved socially with his guild. He keeps in almost daily contact with a handful of friends he has met in the game, and has spent time with them outside of *World of Warcraft* as well. Aaron spends most of his time online going on raids with his guild.

Tyler has a level 60 druid and focuses on player versus player combat in enemy territories, organized by his guild. During the summer, he played about 3 hours a day, but school has limited his time for playing. He has stuck with one guild for all his time in *World of Warcraft*. Other than raids with his guild, he’s been trying to collect a complete set of items called pets: small characters who follow your character around, but have no affect on the game. They exist only for aesthetic purposes.

Ben has not yet reached level 60 with any of his characters. As with the other players I interviewed, he played a 2-4 hours a day over the summer, but has since not had much time to play. His two characters are level 30 and 35, a druid and rogue respectively. He’s been in a lot of different guilds, mostly to have people to talk to and ask for help when he gets stuck.

David plays for a couple of hours a day with his level 60 priest. He’s only been in one guild since he started playing. He spends most of his time doing raids, though his guild has just started doing that recently and so they often have
troubles completing a raid. David has stayed with his guild to have access to the level 60, 40 person instances, but doesn’t particularly enjoy the process of doing those large raids.

Owen is a playful player, who uses his 8 characters as various personae he can assume while he plays. Most of his 8 characters are in the same guild, in which he is mostly involved socially because his characters are too low level to participate in most guild activities. Owen plays World of Warcraft slowly and thoughtfully, which has made it hard for him to group with players who want to use their time in the game to most efficiently gain levels. Instead, he spends most of his time playing alone, with the guild chat for company.

Results

Despite being often placed in opposition to “real” interpersonal experience, sociality in World of Warcraft depends heavily in relationships that were neither formed nor maintained inside the game. The effects of social networks from outside World of Warcraft on World of Warcraft sociality are seen in all aspects of the game, for all the players I interviewed. Often these relationships are made in real-life situations, but they can also be formed in previous games. These effects can be seen in a range of situations, including group formation and conflict resolution. To show the ways in which social networks permeate the experience at all phases of the game, this section shows how these relationships become concentrated into small groups, and the effect this concentration has on sociality.
Concentration of Relationships

A player’s social network is important even before they buy a copy of the game. Every box of *World of Warcraft* contains a “Guest Pass” – a 10-day trial account that is supposed to be given to a friend to give him or her a taste of the game. The implication is that *World of Warcraft* is a game enjoyed best with your friends. This was partially done to offset the high barrier to entry that *World of Warcraft*’s pricing structure causes. To enter this world, a player must first buy a copy of the game for around $50 US, and then pay $15 for each subsequent month of play. Because the first month is the most expensive, this can be a risky proposition without a way for new players to experience the world before buying their own copy. The guest pass makes it easier for new players to be confident that the game will be fun, while at the same time entwining in-game relationships with those formed outside the game.

After installing the game, new players create their first characters. Before they can pick a name, or decide any other details about their character, they must decide which “realm” to join. Each realm occupies a set of servers, and represents a copy of world, each with a unique set of characters. There are very few modern game worlds in which all players of the game actually inhabit the same world. Each realm has its own economy, its own celebrities, and its own politics. Realms also have different rules about character interaction. In some realms, characters can kill each other more or less freely. In others, characters are protected from each other unless all the characters involved consent to combat. Other realms are explicitly for “role playing,” and characters are encouraged to keep conversation and behavior within the mythos of the game. Single realm
games with over a million inhabitants are technically possible, but they are substantially more difficult to design and manage. Realms are often referred to among players as, simply, “servers,” even though any single realm requires many individual servers to maintain it.

This design decision has profound implications for new players. Which realm should they join? The game suggests a realm for a new player to join, based on population densities, but it turns out that this suggestion has little effect on most players’ choices. Every player I talked to made this choice based on which realm other friends had joined. Owen described his process of selecting a realm as “my friend … wanted me to be on the same server as him … On the off chance that I might get to play with him, I figured I wanted to be on his server.” For Owen this meant not joining a role-playing server in which more players might be approaching the game from a more theatrical perspective like he did; the potential of spending time with someone he already knew was more powerful than his own personal feelings about play style.

Ultimately, Owen didn’t end up spending much time with his friend: “we never group together, and we’re seldom on at the same times.” This isn’t necessarily uncommon – Ben also joined a specific realm to be with friends from school, but doesn’t spend much time with them. Still, this behavior is significant because it lays the groundwork for existing social networks being important in sociality within the game. Not only are they significant (as will be shown below), they are quite common. From the very beginning of their experience in the game, players self-select into worlds in which they know other people in that world outside of the game.
**Guild Formation**

There are two common ways in which players are invited to join guilds: as a result of some kind deed done by a player without a guild for a player in a guild, or because of an extant connection with someone already in a guild. For example, David joined his first (and only) “because it was the guild that [my friend] was in.” Tyler joined his guild because “a friend from high school” had joined it. That friend had, in turn, joined it because he knew “them in previous games.” Other players had similar stories. This joining process further concentrates existing social networks into guilds.

Rarely, though, does one social group make an entire guild. Because the high level raids require 40 people, guilds guild members who want to complete those quests need more than just their other friends who play the game. In one of Aaron’s guilds, this problem was solved by “[merging with] another guild that was all Canadian people.” Aaron’s first guild was also constructed out of a few distinct social groups. Aaron was part of a group of people who had played *Star Wars Galaxies* together, and the guild leader of this new *World of Warcraft* guild was part of that group. The guild leader also invited his older brother and his older brother’s friends to join the guild.

Alternatively, guilds looking to find more members can simply recruit people who are otherwise unknown to them. For most guilds, the threshold to being initially invited is low, but people are also frequently ejected from guilds for unacceptable behavior. When recounting the guilds he’s been in, Ben commented that “all the guilds I’ve joined I’ve wandered around and someone sees I’m not in a guild they’ll ask me to join.” Owen had a similar experience
with one of his many characters: “somebody just walked up to me and said ‘Be part of my guild! Please!’ and I was like ‘okay.’”

As a result of these group formation patterns, guilds are often composed of separate and individually cohesive groups. These groups may vary in size, and their strength may vary depending on the origin of the pre-existing relationships. In some synthetic worlds, like Dark Age of Camelot and EVE Online, guilds can organize further, creating alliances, but in World of Warcraft guilds are the highest level of player organization. This structure has a profound effect on the origins and resolution of conflicts in guilds.

**Conflict In Guilds**

Conflict is an important part of culture, and we can look to the way in which conflicts are resolved to provide insights into sociality in World of Warcraft.

Conflict as a feature of cultures has a rich history of study. One definition of conflict, provided below, is a good place to start when analyzing conflict in World of Warcraft.

Conflict means perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.\(^{28}\)

By observing the ways in which groups resolve these divergences of interest, we can learn important lessons about what’s important, both in the sense of what is worth having a conflict about, as well as the social vocabulary used to communicate about conflicts. In the process, we will see the prominent role played by social networks both inside and outside the game world.

Ejection from guilds is reasonably common, and it usually results from conflicts. Sometimes these conflicts are simply about etiquette. One of Owen’s most memorable guild experiences was about a player who was invited to join his guild, and subsequently insisted that he be granted the power to eject other players from the guild. This quickly led to his removal from the guild. For comedic effect, Owen’s character insisted that he wanted that ability too. While he was never given the ability, Owen remembered it as one of his most memorable guild experiences because of its camaraderie and humor. Tyler also had two similar experiences about characters being booted from guilds over matters of etiquette. In one case, the guild had recently recruited a new player who was well-behaved when with among other members of the guild, but was reportedly to be stealing items he didn’t deserve and being generally rude when not with the guild. After people from outside the guild complained about his behavior, he was quickly ejected from the guild. In another case, a character was rudely demanding help and support from other members of the guild, which ended in the character being ejected.

As among long-standing friends who have a more solid relationship, established members of the guild are better placed to interpret or forgive another established guild mate’s behavior. As Owen’s example illustrates, even though he ostensibly asked for the same thing the player that got kicked out asked for, it was understood differently because the character he was playing was well known to be stupid for humorous effect. Still, established members are by no means immune to guild punishment. In David’s guild, one of his friends from school and another member of his guild started going on raids with another guild because David’s guild didn’t have enough high level characters to do its
own raids. Suddenly, David’s guild leader decided that they would soon start going on raids as well, and that guild members going on raids with other guilds would be kicked out. To make his point, he kicked David’s friend out of the guild, but not the other character who had been raiding with him. This struck David is unfair, and he believed the disparity in punishment was because the guild master had been friends with the other character in a different synthetic world.

Aaron told a similar story about a friend he had met in a previous game. This friend, whose character was named Crilis, was a particularly effective raid leader. Raids can be eight hours long, and if the raid leader wasn’t good, they could be a miserable experience. Describing the distinction between Crilis’ raids and another well-known raid leader’s raids, Aaron said, “People would come out of [the other character’s] raids and be miserable … I could say I spent 8 hours in [a high level instance] and had a lot of fun.” Crilis’ prowess at raid organization began to cause frustration in his guild. Crilis was not the guild leader, but because of his leadership on raids, many players listened more to him than to guild leadership. This power shift was unacceptable to the guild leadership, and they gave Crilis an ultimatum – stop leading raids or leave the guild. Crilis left the guild to form his own guild, and took some of the original guild’s members with him.

In these situations, guilds enforce a common standard of behavior by controlling their memberships and punishing, through expulsion or other methods, behavior that is considered unacceptable. Each guild decides who has the power to censure guild members. Some guilds have complex title structures in which characters can advance (and gain more guild powers) as they
demonstrate their reliability. The grounds for punishment also vary from guild to guild, depending on the guild’s priorities. As shown in the case of Tyler’s guild members who responded to negative feedback about a member, guilds are also sensitive to their image in the case of the player who was misbehaving around other guilds. Tyler also remembered that the member they had had a problem with had come from a “guild on our server who was known for being ... rude.” Guild image worked both ways – good behavior reflected well on the guild, and well-known guilds generated automatic respect for their members. On one raid, David noticed that the raiding team had a character from one of “the two good guilds, [and I said] ‘Wow, we have a good player with us.’” This shows that guild reputation is a significant and meaningful part of a character’s identity.

**Item-Related Conflicts**

In those cases the cases discussed earlier, the offence was usually one of manners. More often, conflicts involve the acquisition of items. Items play an important role in the power of each particular character. They are also the only way for a character’s abilities to improve once they have reached level 60. As a result, characters who have reached level 60 tend to spend most of their time trying to acquire items. Whenever enemies in the game are killed, their corpses can be examined to reveal items they were carrying. The more powerful the creature killed, the more valuable and rare the items. Only the most powerful monsters in each raid instance drop the items that level 60 characters want. This presents a problem – up to forty characters helped kill the monster, but the monster only drops a few items.

A variety of systems have evolved to formalize the process of distributing
these items. In small groups, when a powerful item is discovered, it is granted to the character that would make immediate use of it. Because different characters have different abilities, any particular item is useful to only certain kinds of characters. If multiple characters would use the item, the interested characters each generate a random number (mediated by the game), with the item going to the character that “rolled” the highest number. If none of the characters would use it immediately, then all characters present roll a random number to decide who gets it. Even if your character can’t use the item, they you can always sell it.

This works reasonably well for small groups, but in the high end instances with so few items, so many players who want them, and so much time invested in getting each item, the vicissitudes of random numbers are not sufficiently deterministic for the players involved. Because this problem of distributing a few items among a large group of people has been faced in game worlds for some time, one particular system has evolved to address the issue. All important items for level 60 characters are assigned a certain number of points, known as Dragon Kill Points (DKP). When a monster drops an item governed by the DKP system, every character involved in the raid gets the number of points that item is worth, divided by the number of characters on the raid – in essence, every player gets a small fractional ownership in the item. Along with a point value, DKP systems usually specify what kinds of characters are allowed to receive the item. Thus when an item drops, all the characters involved get a small amount of DKP, and the character with the most DKP who is eligible for the item is given the option to spend part of his personal bank of DKP to “buy” the item. This system ensures that players receive items with more or less regular frequency, according to how much time they spend on raids. The bookkeeping for this system is usually
handled automatically by game plug-ins. There are no technical measures that prevent any character from simply walking up and taking the items themselves, but it is made clear to characters through conversation with more elder players that subverting the group norms for item distribution is unacceptable. Players who do this are branded as “ninja looters” and can be subject to widespread character assassination if their perceived crimes are sufficiently serious. These social pressures make such behavior disadvantageous for characters over the long term.

This description of the DKP system may sound deterministic, but it simply changes the way in which arguments about item distribution are framed. The technical aspects of the system that track the points of items do not enforce the ultimate selection of the character receiving the item. That is usually left up to the raid leader. Thus the arguments about items become arguments about which kinds of characters can make the best use of the item. They can also turn into indictments of the particular organization of the DKP system, and how it might favor a certain kind of character, or players who have more time to spend generating DKP by going on raids. Because the final distribution of items and structure of the DKP system are the raid leader’s responsibility, his relationship with the interested or aggrieved characters, both in the game and outside the game, has an effect on how items are distributed.

In Aaron’s guild, the primary point of contention was which kind of characters could use which items. Each raid leader was known to have his or her own particular feelings on this subject. In one situation, the raid killed a monster and found an item called the “Mageblade” on its corpse. As the name implies, this would be a useful weapon for mages, and so the raid members assumed that
the mage with the most DKP would receive the item. Instead, Aaron, who had more DKP than any of the mages in the raid, decided he wanted the item. He hadn’t gotten an item in a while and though this item wasn’t clearly the best for his character, he had what he believed were compelling uses for it. Before the mage could take the item, Aaron pointed out that despite the name, it was also quite useful for his character, a paladin and that since he had more DKP, he should receive the item. The raid leader accepted Aaron’s rational, much to the mage’s dismay. The mage blocked Aaron (ignored any messages Aaron sent him) and got his friends to harass Aaron about the issue by sending him a constant stream of unsolicited messages. In the aftermath of this event, as the mage refused to let the issue die, Aaron convinced his guild mates that he had behaved appropriately, making the mage’s continued whining about the issue unacceptable as judged by the rest of the guild: in Aaron’s words, “all the guild leaders and raid leaders were on my side and … this kid had no right to be a dick to me about it.” A week later, the mage found the item in another instance, and so the conflict was defused. In this case, relationships outside the game did not have a significant effect on the conflict’s resolution, but this story does illustrate how the DKP system changes the vocabulary used to argue about who deserves items.

Aaron also recounted the story of a character named Saren, who had a similar experience. When going on a raid with a guild other than his own, Saren was denied an item that, in his opinion, was most appropriate for his character, based on the rules agreed upon for the raid. Instead, the raid leader gave the item to a female member of his own guild with whom he was romantically involved. Saren was livid. He plotted an elaborate revenge scheme. Pretending the issue
had not been a big deal, he continued to spend time with the guild, and eventually joined it. He ran instances with the guild for months, biding his time. Finally, after a monster in a major instance was killed, the raid found two items that the female guild member wanted. Saren walked up to the corpse of the monster, picked up both of the items, and teleported out of the instance.

Saren’s story illustrates a few important points. Although guild membership does provide a formal model of social relationships, it does not necessarily describe the often-invisible web of personal relationships upon which guild organization actually rests. These connections are often created outside of the game and imported into it. Because Saren stole the items from characters that were not part of his original social circle (who may or may not have been friends outside the game, Aaron didn’t mention it), his behavior was more or less condoned by his friends because his theft of the items fulfilled a just revenge. Had he perpetrated these crimes against his original social circles, he would probably have been blacklisted from raiding with other groups because of a backstabbing reputation. Similarly, had his Certainly, no one from the guild he betrayed would associate with him again, but for the rest of the server, it was a reason not to cross him.

Not just was this not a reason to distrust Saren, in Aaron’s words “...it was so funny. Everyone thought it was hilarious.” It was funny in the same way a villain’s plan to kill the hero backfiring might be funny; Saren had been wronged, and returned the favor in kind. After it happened, Saren’s friends welcomed him back because, as Aaron described the situation, there was no reason to “blacklist [him], because there’s no risk he will do that to his friends.”

In this situation, there was a clear distinction between Saren’s friends and
Saren’s guild. This was true of David, too, who want to take part in high level raids and so stuck with his original guild, even when his friend was kicked out. At that point, the guild didn’t represent his friends; it became a tool for him to get to high-level raids. Thus the meaning of guild membership can change depending on the extent to which it is aligned with a more fundamental social structure, which is heavily influenced by relationships that exist outside of the game.

**Conclusions**

These findings are valuable because they describe, from the perspective of the players, the ways in which relationships from outside the synthetic world are concentrated within it, and how that affects sociality within the world. In this way, relationships are as portable as many other ideas from the real world. There is some other recent work studying synthetic worlds that supports these findings.

While the paper isn’t yet publicly available, the abstract of a paper by James Barry\(^\text{29}\), titled “Gamers in Motion: A Study of Online Gamer ‘Guild’ Migration” suggests important parallels with the work presented in this paper. Barry found that guilds would often make en-masse migrations from one game world to another. While my interviews didn’t uncover this specific phenomenon, they did show that the social networks in *World of Warcraft* are strongly

influenced by those created both in other games and outside game worlds entirely.

Nick Yee has conducted extensive surveys of players of a range of virtual game worlds. He has surveyed players about playing with people they know, as well as more specifically about how many play with romantic partners and family members. In these studies, Yee found that “about 80% of players are playing with someone they know in [real life] on a regular basis.” This percentage is quite striking, and supports my findings about the extent to which relationships formed outside the game are present within the game as well.

Yee also collects narratives from stories about a variety of topics. Evidence of offline relationships being carried online is present there as well. His respondents talk about, for example, “My RL nephew was helping me kill the Black Dire in Mistmoore” or how a guild uses friends who live together outside of the game to manage raid communication. Another player described a memorable situation in which his “real life friend were playing as miners in a town called Minoc” and stood up against an aggressive higher-level character. These are just a few of the numerous situations in which relationships from outside the game have come up in Yee’s work, but they help show that the

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experiences of my participants are not anomalous; this is a widespread phenomenon.

These findings, and their similarity to other recent work, points towards an understanding of the relationship between sociality in games and sociality outside of games as not being as distinct as they once were. This is an important understanding to have as attempt to understand sociality more broadly in synthetic worlds. We must be aware of how much of the world outside the porous membrane has seeped in, and watch closely for its effects. The webs of significance within the game are themselves suspended in another layer of meaning – that of the worlds traditionally studied by anthropologists, and their approaches to research can help us grapple with these questions.