Playing with Pride: Marginalized Players Claiming Space Through Community Building and Equity Enforcement in *World of Warcraft*

By

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Abstract

Video game culture has been soundly criticized as being the privileged domain of heterosexual, white, male players and it has been criticized for marginalizing those players who do not meet these criteria. In current games studies research, the ways marginalized players navigate, challenge, and reshape online gaming environments to suit their own needs has received very little academic attention. In the online multiplayer game World of Warcraft developed by Blizzard Entertainment, two groups of LGBTQ players (and their allies) have created an alternative community to that of the mainstream. While the mainstream World of Warcraft community is plagued with oppressive heteronormativity and homophobia, this alternative community is based on equity and inclusivity. Utilizing a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, this thesis examines player-created texts, several official World of Warcraft forum threads, and Blizzard Entertainment’s legal policy documents in three distinct yet interrelated sections. First, drawing on Judith Butler’s (2009) notion of precarity, I argue that LGBTQ players have been positioned as precarious subjects in World of Warcraft culture. I then demonstrate how this precarity is mitigated within this alternate community through the active promotion of an LGBTQ community presence in the game, and through public community building events such as an in-game pride parade. Second, I discuss the importance of community, citizenship, and shared identities in establishing meaningful and inclusive social policies. This is done, in part, by drawing on Benedict Andersons’s (2006) imagined communities and Celia Pearce’s (2009) communities of play to demonstrate the contrast between the mainstream World of Warcraft community and the alternate community. Third, I suggest that regulating and enforcing the language players use in-game and in the forums is essential for promoting equity in World of Warcraft. By preventing the use of hate speech and thus limiting
the harms that can result from it, marginalized players are afforded the opportunity to engage fully in the (social) gaming experience.
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Chapter One: Introduction, Literature Review, Theory, and Methodology

Project Background

I was playing the online multiplayer game World of Warcraft one evening in the summer of 2014. As is typical when I play, I was casually chatting over “voice chat” with a group of people I had never met but whom I had come to call my friends. The group was an odd assortment of people that in other circumstances would likely have never spoken to one another. There were a handful of American high school boys, a surgeon from Singapore (the only other woman in the group), a 33-year-old deep-water welder from New Jersey, a psychology graduate student from Brown University, a 60-something year old man from Texas, an older man from the mid-west US who often rambled about reviving the cold war, and myself - a fledgling sociologist from Canada. We came from very different backgrounds and held diverse beliefs about how and why the (social) world works the way it does. We spent a lot of idle game time talking about current events and political issues, which of course sparked some very interesting (and sometimes heated) discussions.

On that particular summer night, one of the older gentlemen who was playing in a different part of the game than the rest of us, announced that he was sick and tired of hearing about LGBTQ-friendly groups advertising recruitment in public chat channels. He then complained that he did not understand why ‘they’ could not leave ‘their’ sex life out of the game. After participating in what could easily be described as one of those heated discussions I mentioned above, I did a little bit of research. The space he was playing in is called Proudmoore. When I completed an internet search for “Proudmoore World of Warcraft LGBTQ,” several pages of results came back with forum posts, recruitment advertisements, fan-site interviews and
assorted other webpages that quite often proclaimed Proudmoore as the “unofficial LGBT-friendly server”\(^1\) in *World of Warcraft* (Archer 2014; WoWWiki 2014, Server: Proudmoore US). I was quite curious about why this was the case and how it came to be. This curiosity marked the start of my Master’s research project.

Video game play has become a significant part of mainstream entertainment. Not only are video games increasingly important to the Canadian and US economies, but they have become one of the more prominent cultural products produced and consumed in both countries. The Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC) and the American Entertainment Software Association (ESA) report that 54\% of Canadians and 59\% of Americans play digital games (ESAC 2014:12; ESA 2014:2), noting that the average age of players in Canada is 33 years old while in the US it is 31 years old (ESAC 2014:12; ESA 2014:3). Given these statistics, video games cannot be thought of simply as an activity engaged in by teenage boys, but rather as a site of cultural expression and participation comprising a much more diverse player base than ever before. As video games move further into mainstream entertainment, the audience becomes increasingly diverse. Given this change in audience from a young, white, male, heterosexual focus to one including players of other genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and races, players displaying any difference from the previous stereotypical norm have frequently been subject to some serious backlash. This backlash typically takes the form of verbal insults and/or exclusion from participation (Consalvo 2012). Several high profile incidents of misogyny and harassment\(^2\)

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\(^1\) A server is the technology that houses avatars and provides the digital space in which *World of Warcraft* comes to life.

\(^2\) In February 2011 Jennifer Hepler, a Senior Writer for the video game developer BioWare, was personally attacked through various social media for suggesting during an interview that players be able to skip combat in Role Playing Games where the story is the most important aspect (Consalvo 2012). In May 2012 Anita Sarkeesian became the target of an online hate campaign as backlash to her Kickstarter (an online crowdfunding platform) project to raise money for a video series examining the representation of women in video games. In the fall of 2014, Sarkeesian was forced to cancel a talk at Utah State University because of threats of gun violence (Griggs 2014). This harassment
have occurred receiving mainstream media press\textsuperscript{3}, essentially shining a spotlight on some of the problems facing the rapidly growing video game industry and culture. While scholars have been studying video games since their inception, the recent mainstream focus on gaming seems to have provoked more scholarly interest in the area. Drawing on queer theory, feminist scholars such as Shaw (2012a), Sundén and Sveningsson (2012), and Pulos (2013) have recently begun exploring the intersection of video games and sexuality. This research has worked to better understand queer representation(s) in video games and culture, to explore how queer identities operate in online spaces, and also to identify the ways heteronormativity in video games can lead to oppressive social conditions for players in online game settings.

Despite the growing body of work on these themes of representation, identity, and heteronormativity, scholars examining marginalization in gaming have not yet fully examined the importance of the role players have in resisting and (re)shaping their own experiences within video game culture. This is problematic because conversations around marginalized players tend to focus on the negative and detrimental aspects of the gaming and cultural experience, often documenting exclusion and/or harassment without giving voice to the success players have had in resisting or rejecting marginalization. While it is certainly important to collect information about how and why marginalization occurs and to whom, I believe it is equally important to collect information about how potentially marginalized players counter, challenge and thwart marginalization and harassment. By doing so, we can learn from these players and discover new

\textsuperscript{3} These are links to some mainstream media coverage of recent events:
\texttt{http://www.macleans.ca/society/technology/the-revolting-sexism-of-video-gamers/}
\texttt{http://feministfrequency.com/2014/10/23/media-interview-link-round-up-for-october-2014/}
\texttt{http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/15/living/gamergate-explainer/index.html}
ways of encouraging equitable video game cultures in other contexts. The goal of this project is to shed light on one of the ways marginalized players have shaped their own cultural experience of a particular online video game. In a video game culture where heteronormativity and homophobia are ubiquitous, a particular group of players has created a space where equity and inclusion are the norm. It is my hope that this research will contribute to our understanding of productive resistance and positive social change. It is possible that what is learned about establishing equity and resisting oppression in the online gaming world can be translated to other contexts and environments.

This study focuses particularly on the self-identified LGBTQ community and their friends and allies residing on the Proudmoore server\(^4\) in the game *World of Warcraft*. *World of Warcraft* is a highly social game where a fun game experience typically depends on social participation in group activities. Like in many other contexts outside of gaming, LGBTQ people who play *World of Warcraft* are often confronted with heteronormativity and homophobia that results in their marginalization and acts as a barrier to full social participation. As a reaction to this exclusion, an alternative community within *World of Warcraft* has come into being. This alternative community can be interpreted as an act of resistance against a mainstream culture that has not only been insensitive to LGBTQ players’ requests to be treated fairly, but has also been outright hostile and violent in their responses. Blizzard Entertainment has continually failed to offer adequate protections from this hostility, so players have come together to create their own informal protections. I argue that players on the Proudmoore server have encouraged an equitable gaming environment and fostered a meaningful, inclusive community in *World of Warcraft*.

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\(^4\) Servers house avatars and provide the digital space in which *World of Warcraft* comes to life. There are over 250 distinct servers for players to choose from that provide an identical game space, but house different players and therefore distinct player communities. In general, players do no interact with players from other servers in-game, though there are some circumstances where avatars can be temporarily transported to other servers for a short time.
*Warcraft* by providing players protections from bigotry and a space where marginalized players can become part of the centre. The term bigotry is used specifically because it is a term commonly used by Proudmoore players to specify the kinds of language and behaviour that are not welcome in their guilds or on the Proudmoore server in general. In their guild charter The Stonewall Family refers to bigotry as,

> Negative comments or hurtful jokes based on sexual orientation, gender, race, religion, age, body-type…This includes use of anyone’s sexual orientation in a negative or demeaning way – use of the term ‘gay’ as a pejorative, demeaning comments about body parts or any terms like ‘breeder’ which marginalize a segment of our membership (The Stonewall Family Charter 2013).

This is the meaning I wish to convey through use of the term “bigotry” throughout the entirety of this paper.

The paper is organized by three more specific, but interrelated arguments. First, drawing on Judith Butler’s (2009) notion of precarity, I argue that LGBTQ players have been positioned as precarious subjects in *World of Warcraft* culture and that this precarity is mitigated on the Proudmoore server. In other words, LGBTQ players are differentially exposed to violence and harassment in broader *World of Warcraft* culture while simultaneously being afforded fewer institutional protections from this violence and harassment. Players are regularly confronted with homophobic language and behaviours that can range from using ‘gay’ in a pejorative way, to being ridiculed relentlessly or even being removed/excluded from a group because they ‘sound gay’ through voice chat. On Proudmoore however, players work to both prevent violence and harassment and also provide protections for themselves and others. I suggest that this is mainly accomplished through actively promoting an LGBTQ presence on the server, and through server-wide community building events.
Second, I discuss the importance of community, the relationship between equity and citizenship, and shared identities in establishing meaningful and inclusive social policies. Blizzard Entertainment and the Proudmoore guilds are each responsible for maintaining and reproducing their respective communities. The mainstream World of Warcraft community is discussed in the context of Benedict Anderson’s (2006) imagined community, while guilds are discussed as what Celia Pearce (2009) calls communities of play. The social policies, or rules and regulations, established to govern these communities reflect the shared values and identities of the community members at large. While Blizzard Entertainment’s imagined community is oppressive for many players, the alternative communities of play on Proudmoore offer players relief from that oppression. I demonstrate that the Proudmoore guilds have made players’ individual experiences of difference the foundation of their shared identities and a core value of their communities. They have written inclusivity into their guild charters and rules, and use what Marshall (1992) would term social citizenship as a tool to manage their communities and enforce equity within them.

Third, I will argue that regulating the use of pejorative language and then enforcing those regulations are key aspects of creating and sustaining an equitable gaming environment. It should be emphasized that simply establishing policy is not sufficient, there must be some kind of repercussion for players unwilling to play by the rules. While Blizzard Entertainment has specific rules about what language is permissible through their official chat channels and what is not, these rules have a reputation for not being enforced. For example, although it is outlined as not permissible in Blizzard Entertainment policy, verbal (or written) discrimination, hatred, and violence against particular groups of people based on a social category, particularly sexual orientation, is quite common in World of Warcraft culture. On Proudmoore, The Stonewall
Family and The Spreading Taint have strict rules about what kind of language cannot be used and they actively enforce these rules. By preventing the use of hate speech and pejorative language and thus limiting the harms that can result from it, marginalized players are afforded the opportunity to engage fully in the (social) gaming experience. It is my contention that this is essential in creating an atmosphere of equality among players.

**An Introduction to World of Warcraft**

*World of Warcraft* is the longest running and most successful Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) at the time of writing. At its peak, the game boasted over 12 million subscribers. Shortly after the game’s 10th anniversary and the release of its 5th expansion pack, Blizzard Entertainment announced that the game hosts just over 10 million subscribers worldwide (Blizzard 2014). For many players, *World of Warcraft* is a highly social game that facilitates the founding of new friendships and the maintenance of existing ones. In her study of massively multiplayers online games (MMOs), Pearce (2009) suggests that “play itself may accelerate the process of social bonding” and further explains that players often log in to MMOs out of a desire to visit with friends rather than to play a particular game (129). A large part of socialization and friendship building in *World of Warcraft* happens within guilds.

Guilds come in all shapes and sizes, but can be thought of loosely as a team where players typically socialize, share resources, and provide assistance to one another. *World of Warcraft* includes several structural game functions aimed at making guild maintenance and communication easier for players. Guild members have access to: a private text-based chat channel; a guild bank where they can pool and share resources (under control of the guild master); and eligibility for guild perks, for example faster travel speed and extra in-game currency generated for the guild bank that can then be used by guild members. Many guilds use
VoIP software on a regular basis both during planned group activities, and simply for chatting with others while doing solo activities. Voice chat is helpful for coordinating and organizing large groups of people and can also provide a more personal experience for players.

Like any organization, the larger the guild membership, the more organization is required to maintain smooth functioning. Williams et al (2006:347) found that guilds with over 35 members require dedicated leadership and administration that typically takes the form of rules, social policies and formal sign-ups or schedules. The formal organizational practices most commonly found in World of Warcraft guilds are: articulating a guild mission-statement; developing and enacting recruitment and expulsion policies and procedures; and maintaining an external guild website (Williams et al. 2006). Guilds that have these types of policies in place tend to operate more effectively and are able to avoid some of the common sources of conflict that often arise within guilds. In their study of the social aspects of guilds, Williams et al. (2006) found that members recognized the need for “maturity, responsibility, and player welfare” within their guilds and explained that there is a certain level of care members commonly felt for each other (345). Further, players most often continue guild membership because they enjoy the company of their guild mates and believe they benefit from being a member. Conversely, they found that players are most likely to leave a guild when they do not share the same values and/or goals.

**Heteronormativity and Homophobia in World of Warcraft**

Video game culture is commonly understood as masculine and heteronormative, and the culture within and surrounding World of Warcraft is no exception. Pulos (2013) points out that although there is no purpose or requirement for it, a constructed sexual binary has been embedded in the design of the game and is reinforced through precise regulation. Further,
heteronormativity is commonplace and often harshly enforced by players and game policies/moderators, creating an atmosphere of oppression for those who do not conform (Pulos 2013). Pejorative language regarding sexuality is common place in-game and in World of Warcraft-related player-created texts. Making reference to her World of Warcraft guild’s private chat channel, Nardi (2010) writes, “It was as though the ether of the chat channel must be regularly refreshed with the recitation of sexualized, homophobic words” (157). Sundén (2012) agrees, when she says that homophobic language is used often in World of Warcraft to reinforce and perpetuate heteronormativity. Many players seem to feel the need to prove their ‘straightness’ by reciting their aversion, dismissal or outright hatred of homosexuality to whoever is willing to listen. It is out of a desire to escape or avoid these kinds of practices and behaviour that many players seek out a place like Proudmoore. Indeed Pulos (2013) writes, “The formation of guilds respectful to the issues and concerns of the LGBTQ communities are particularly important as the game is designed within a heteronormative matrix that is resistant to this community” (81).

**Proudmoore**

In 2006, a player named Sara Andrews created a LGBT friendly guild called ‘Oz’ to create a space for players that was free from the typical heteronormativity, homophobia and harassment that is so common in World of Warcraft. The guild’s credo was “one of peace and unity without judgments or intolerance of others, whatever they may be” (Anderson February 7th 2006). After advertising recruitment for her guild through in-game chat channels, Blizzard moderators issued Andrews a warning telling her she had breached the harassment policy that is

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5 A moderator is someone responsible for ensuring terms of service agreements are being adhered to and for approving, rejecting, or modifying other people’s messages in an online forum. It is common for public forums to be moderated (by either an employee or volunteer).
part of their Terms of Use Agreement. After some back and forth with Blizzard via email, Andrews was threatened with banishment from the game if she continued. Lambda Legal, a non-profit LGBT legal defense group, wrote a letter to Blizzard on Andrews’ behalf saying Blizzard’s actions were illegal and disregarded US anti-discrimination legislation. Blizzard eventually conceded and apologized to Andrews (Anderson February 7th 2006). Although there had been an LGBTQ community presence on the server prior to this case, it is commonly believed by players that this marked the beginning of Proudmoore’s reputation as the unofficial LGBTQ friendly server (WoWWiki 2014, Server: Proudmoore US).

Nine years after the Andrews case, Proudmoore has a very prominent LGBTQ player presence. Since 2005, the server has been home to Proudmoore Pride, an annual in-game pride parade that attracts thousands of players from around the world (Proudmoore Pride 2014). The parade is hosted by two of the largest and most prominent LGBT friendly meta-guilds found on the Proudmoore server, The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint – Rough Trade Gaming Community. Each of these meta-guilds is home to multiple guilds that are connected via a text based chat channel, voice chat software, and access to their respective meta-guild website. As is common with large guilds (Williams et al. 2006), both The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint have a guild charter that outlines the mission of the meta-guild, as well as the values that are at the core of the community. It is these two meta-guilds and the broader server community they help to promote that are the focus of this project.

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6 The Rough Trade Gaming Community maintains LGBTQ friendly guilds throughout several online multiplayer games. The Spreading Taint is the World of Warcraft branch of this broader gaming community.
The Intersections of Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Video Games

To achieve a better understanding of how players challenge marginalization in video game culture, it is important to understand how video games have been and continue to be discussed at the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality. A plethora of scholars have documented and discussed the hegemonic masculinity that privileges white, male, heterosexual players and how marginalized players negotiate this digital and cultural terrain. The majority of this research has detailed the experience of female players (Brown, Hall, Holtzer, Brown and Brown 1997; Butler 2000; Schott and Horrell 2000:37), often focusing on how and why they play digital games, however, much of this work has been criticized (Jenson and De Castell 2010) for using a narrow understanding of gender and/or generalizing a diverse collection of individuals into one essential category. Race has been examined mostly in terms of textual representation, frequently leaving out meaningful conversations about how players interact with the medium and each other in racialized ways (Daniels and LaLone 2012; Dietrich 2012). Interrogations of sexuality and gaming have also focused largely on LGBTQ representation (and lack thereof) or the ways game structures reinforce heteronormativity. In 2012, mainstream media was riddled with accounts of harassment, misogyny and hate in video game culture, which prompted Consalvo’s (2012) plea for increased feminist scholarly attention on “toxic game culture”. Since then, feminist game studies as an area of expertise has been expanding steadily. Although the study of marginalized video game players is a rapidly growing research area, little attention has been given to how these players resist marginality and appropriate social space within video game culture.

Early research about gender and gaming was mainly concerned with uncovering why girls were not playing video games as often as boys (Kafai et al. 2008: xiv). There were a variety
of explanations offered for why this was the case, most of which were grounded in a gender ontology that assumes two sexes and then conflates sex and gender. In their 2010 review of 30 years of gender and gaming scholarship, Jenson and De Castell argue that the dominant reasons girls and women did not play games was defined through lack; female players were lacking where male players were thriving. A common explanation given was that females had a lack of interest or desire to use and understand technology (especially computers) and by extension video games (Butler 2000; Schott and Horrell 2000:37). Others argued that a lack of skill prevented females from engaging with games the same way males did (Brown, Hall, Holtzer, Brown and Brown 1997) or that females simply had a lack of self-confidence regardless of their skill level (Shashaani 1993).

This narrow understanding of gender spurred a whole branch of games research focused on differences between the likes and dislikes of males and females playing video games, frequently juxtaposing male versus female as if the two were concrete categories of people with opposing interests (Carr 2005; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Royse et al. 2007; Schott and Horrell 2000). Female players were described as liking role playing games that have a non-human protagonist (Schott and Horrell 2000:42), games that are based on open-ended exploration rather than high-risk competition (Gorriz and Medina 2000; Schott and Horrell:42), and games that emphasize rich social interactions (Gorriz and Medina 2000; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006:920). In 2003 Bryce and Rutter predicted that the propagation of online video games would provide anonymous spaces in which female players could safely hone their gaming skills in order to become more competitive. However, Hartmann and Klimmt (2006) found that competition does not appeal to female players as much as it does to male players, so games that involve a high level of competition discourage female players (923). This back and forth
between scholars about who likes what kind of game and why has done little to further understandings of gender and gaming. It has however, prompted a review and revision of methodological strategies for video games research by feminist game scholars.

Gender and video games has also been discussed in relation to the video game industry, game design, and production. In part because of dominant assumptions about females and technology, marketing video games to girls was not even considered prior to 1990 because girls were not seen as a feasible market. As Laurel (2008), a veteran of the video game industry puts it, “Everyone knew girls simply didn’t like computer games and wouldn’t play them” (22). When games were released with a female audience in mind, the lack of advertising accompanying the release of games designed for girls resulted in poor sales which reinforced the idea that games for girls would not sell (Laurel 2008:22). Much of the early research done on gender and video games was meant to find ways of increasing female participation in video game play. Indeed, some authors seemed optimistic that a shift in audience would result in a shift in the design of games and experiences of female players (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:83). In 2000, Schott and Horrell argued that potential female players might not want to play video games because of the rampant sexism and misogyny found in the design of the majority of games (Schott and Horrell 2000:37). However, as of 2014, 48% of Canadian gamers\(^7\) are female (ESAC 2014: 12) and although female players make up nearly half of the gaming audience, the video game industry remains preoccupied with the male audience and heteronormative hypermasculine ideals (Daniels and LaLone 2012; Jensen and De Castell 2013; Kafai et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2009). While this body of research indicates an interest in gender and gaming, it is still very narrow in that it leaves out any consideration of race, sexuality, age, ability etc.

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\(^7\) Defined by the ESAC as someone who has played a digital game within the last 4 weeks (ESAC 2014:12)
Several scholars interrogate video games in terms of their whiteness and colourblindness. David Dietrich (2012) contends that video game design often restricts the creation of non-white avatars leading to a normatively white space and reinforcing ideologies of white supremacy. In some video games customization options are so limited that non-white players simply appear non-existent. Conversely, Daniels and LaLone (2012) argue that when non-white characters are present in video games (both non-player characters and main characters) they commonly play out racial stereotypes that are not representative of the embodiment of a person of colour, but rather of what the (white) programmer perceives that experience to be. They say these kinds of video games “are a primarily white interpretation of African American culture for white people to play (Daniels and LaLone 2012: 93)”. Also focused on representation, David Leonard (2009) shows how video games like the Grand Theft Auto series present youths of colour as criminal, dangerous, and a threat to the social and moral fabric of America. He then goes on to argue that while the level of violence in these games and others have inspired substantial controversy, public discourse has never honed in on the ways these games normalize and maintain white supremacy. By ignoring representations of race and focusing solely on violence, he says this discourse then “rationalizes the fear and policing of Black and Brown communities” (Leonard 2009:248). While contributing to important discussions, these scholars focus very heavily on representation without offering much consideration of player interactions with the medium or with each other.

Drawing on work focused on representation, K.L. Gray studied the way linguistic profiling through voice chat in Xbox Live leads to overt acts of racism. She argues that because the typical player is believed to be white, a black sounding voice can result in the player being labelled as deviant, and for some players, this justifies the use of racist speech (K.L. Gray 2012).
In a different vein, Lisa Nakamura (2010) explores the way racism intersects with humor in video game culture. She argues that racist griefing\(^8\) is seen as funny in online gaming communities because of how unbelievable it is. The more egregious a speech act or text is, the more a player ‘doesn’t mean it’, which in turn determines the level of humour the speech act or text is perceived to have. She asserts that because racist griefing is not meant to be taken seriously, it undermines players’ ability to overtly oppose it. Further, when players do challenge this kind of talk, they run the risk of being seen as an outsider who does not understand gaming humor (Nakamura 2010).

As mentioned previously, sexuality and video games has only recently become a topic of scholarly interest. It would be impossible to review this area without discussing the work of Adrienne Shaw. Her influential work examines the social construction of ‘gaymers’ and some of the problems with arguing for in-game representation (Shaw 2009). She contends that the common understanding of a gaymer as a homosexual, male, player of video games does not accommodate the diversity in the collection of people who actually identify as gaymers. Instead, she explains, “gaymers privileged an appreciation of and attentiveness to the artifice (and humor) of gender and sexual norms, even if they did not all share a preference for non-normative sexual practices” (Shaw 2009:69). Further, she suggests that typical arguments for LGBTQ representation fail to take into account this diversity, and that players are more concerned with their experience of play than they are with seeing LGBTQ characters in-game. This finding conflicts with understandings of and arguments for representation of race, pointing to the need for proponents of diverse representation to re-examine the ways they approach race and sexuality.

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\(^8\) Griefing is when a player intentionally annoys and harasses another player or players using the game environment or mechanisms in an unintended way. The goal is to ruin or disrupt other’s play experience.
Conversations around heteronormativity have also been important to understanding sexuality and video games. Alexis Pulos (2013) argues that the heteronormative ideology structurally imposed in World of Warcraft translates to a player base that largely believes it is appropriate for the game to operate this way, and that players can and should discipline anyone who transgresses the established boundaries. While acknowledging the heteronormative structure that is unarguably entrenched in World of Warcraft, Sundén (2012) takes a different tack and suggests that given the coding of technology as masculine and the increasing presence of female players passionate about gaming, the collision between masculine norms and hegemonic heterosexual femininity opens a space for a queer understanding of femininity.

So far, games scholarship has engaged with gender, race, and sexuality mainly in terms of demographics, production, representation, and structure. Few scholars have explored marginalization in video games beyond simply explaining how and/or why it occurs and documenting those players’ experiences. Fewer still have considered marginalization in conjunction with sexuality and video games. It is my contention that it is just as important to investigate the ways players resist the marginalization scholars have documented and explained and to draw attention to counter hegemonic discourses.

**Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

This project utilizes discourse analysis to study heteronormativity and homophobia in the game World of Warcraft. More specifically, I do a case-based analysis of two guilds, The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint on the Proudmoore server to gain a better understanding of how players who do not conform to heteronormative ideology can (and do) resist and challenge it. Before understanding how players engage in resistance, it is necessary to know what is being resisted. In other words, we must examine the dominant discourses before
we can analyze what disrupts them. Broadly, I examine how LGBTQ players are positioned precariously and how players have created an alternative community that relieves that state of precarity, how players negotiate the World of Warcraft space in terms of citizenship and community, and how understandings of free speech and hate speech influence players’ ideas about how and if language should be regulated and policed within the game. These discourses play out in official Blizzard Entertainment texts, between players in World of Warcraft forums and fan-sites, in the media, and in player-generated content such as guild websites. These analyses are meant to illustrate the ways heteronormativity and homophobia operate discursively in World of Warcraft culture and highlight disruption and ruptures therein.

There are many forms of discourse analysis that can be used to analyze cultural texts and media. This project uses a Foucauldian interpretation of discourse analysis with the understanding that discourse, power and knowledge are inextricably linked (Foucault 1990). In this sense, discourse consists of much more than simply language, texts, and images. For Foucault, discourse involves the production of meaning and the creation of knowledge that produces the power and forms that people understand as truth. Discourse, he says, is “made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined…posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality” (Foucault 1972:17). As such, discourse establishes meaning and its boundaries; it is the means by which knowledge is conveyed and objects, identities and ideas are formed. Foucault is careful to articulate that, “we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable” (1990:100). In other words, there are multiple discourses operating in different ways in a given space at any given time. He then instructs that, “It is this distribution that we must reconstruct, with the things said and those
concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises; with the variants and
different effects – according to who is speaking, his position of power, the institutional context in
which he happens to be situated – that it implies; and with the shifts and reutilizations of
identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes” (100). It is through discourse that
we make meaning, it shapes how and what we know. There is no meaning outside of discourse
and therefore no way of knowing beyond it. Foucault explains that discourse is made up of
“practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972:49). This makes
discourse analysis key in understanding how dominant discourse, like heteronormativity, sustains
its dominance and becomes naturalized as the norm. In the same vein, discourse analysis can also
provide insight into how resistance to dominant discourse operates.

My understanding and utilization of Foucauldian discourse analysis draws heavily on the
work of John Fiske (1994), who describes discourse as, “language in social use; language
accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the
social conditions of its use and its users: it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to
extend or defend the interests of its discursive community” (3). Fiske sees discourse as the
mechanism through which we make sense of the world; it is the language we use to give
meaning to our realities. He discusses three dimensions of discourse, “a topic or area of social
experience to which its sense making is applied; a social position from which this sense is made
and whose interests it promotes; and a repertoire of words, images, and practices by which
meanings are circulated and power applied” (3). It is from this understanding of discourse that
my analysis begins.

Following Fiske’s lead, playing World of Warcraft will serve as the area of social
experience that is being examined. It is analyzed from the social positions of Blizzard
Entertainment, World of Warcraft players and Proudmoore-based World of Warcraft players. Finally, several player-created texts were selected for analysis including: Blizzard Entertainment’s World of Warcraft Terms of Use Agreement; the World of Warcraft support forum; the official World of Warcraft discussion board; guild websites; previous interviews posted on fan-based video game news websites; and the Proudmoore Pride website and promotional material. The texts used for analysis were all collected between December 2014 and February 2015, and were found in several ways. Blizzard Entertainment’s legal agreements and in-game policies are all accessible via the Battle.net website and can be found by clicking on the “legal” link. The Proudmoore Pride event website, The Stonewall Family website and The Spreading Taint – Rough Trade Gaming Community websites were found through simple internet searches. The guild websites provided links to several fan-sites that host interviews with guild members regarding their experience as guild members and/or participating in the Proudmoore Pride. Finally, simple searches of “LGBT”, “gaymer”, and “hate speech” on the official World of Warcraft forums resulted in many forum threads, although most had been deleted or locked early on by Blizzard Entertainment forum moderators. The related threads that were accessible and had more than 50 posts were titled “Blizzard donates $10k to GaymerX Convention”, “Message from a Vet”, “Hate Speech Solution”, “The LGBT Community”, “lgbt friendly servers”, and “LGBT community on wow?”. Combined, these forums threads amount to 2022 forum posts by players.

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9 www.battle.net is Blizzard Entertainment’s digital entertainment software platform. Aside from those in-game, it is through this website that all official interactions between Blizzard Entertainment and World of Warcraft players transpire. It is also the main channel through which Blizzard Entertainment conveys important information to players.

10 You must have a Battle.net account through Blizzard Entertainment in order to post in these forums.
Discourse analysis is not a commonly used method in games studies research, though it is gaining ground. John Vanderhoef (2013) used discourse analysis to examine the ways casual video games have been discursively paired with femininity while hardcore video games have been discursively paired with masculinity. James Paul Gee, a celebrated games scholar has used various forms of discourse analysis to examine the educational aspects of video games (Gee 2011) and has a forthcoming book titled *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual Worlds and Video Games*. Also, Alexis Pulos (2013) has written on heteronormativity in *World of Warcraft* using Fairclough’s (2003) model of critical discourse analysis. This project seeks to continue the emerging trend of using discourse analysis to study video games and also to contribute to our understanding of marginalized players and their ways of resisting.

**Research Limitations**

As with any research project, there were some limitations with this study. The analysis aims to uncover discourses of resistance and the struggle for marginalized voices to be heard, however I did not actually speak with anyone that is part of the Proudmoore community directly. Instead I relied on publicly available documents that these players have created and my own extensive knowledge of the game and culture. Similarly, I relied on player-created forum posts to the official *World of Warcraft* forums to analyze the discourse of *World of Warcraft* players. Not all players post in the forums, so speaking with players may potentially have produced different results. As a researcher, building the necessary trust to gain access to such online communities would likely take longer than a project at the master’s degree level allows. Further, the often anonymous nature of online community participation makes identifying and contacting potential research participants difficult (if not impossible in some cases). While interviewing players may
have elicited additional information to complement this research, it would not have diminished
the importance of the textual discursive information that was the basis of this study.

Chapter Breakdown

In chapter two I will analyze the discourse surrounding marginalized players and
communities in World of Warcraft, focusing particularly on the LGBTQ community. Through
analysis of World of Warcraft forums, fan-site interviews, guild charters, the World of Warcraft
Terms of Use Agreement, and the Battle.net Code of Conduct document, I argue that LGBTQ
players and communities are positioned as precarious subjects within the World of Warcraft
game and culture. Although the creators and moderators of the game officially promote equity
and aim to create a fun gaming environment for everyone, heteronormativity, bigotry and
harassment are still prevalent between players. I will discuss how discourse concerning the
marginalization of the LGBTQ community works in different ways to reinforce precariousness
for LGBTQ players within World of Warcraft culture. As a response to this precariousness,
players have come together and created an alternative community where they can work together
to resist the oppressive mainstream culture.

In chapter three I will analyze the discourse surrounding community and citizenship in
World of Warcraft. I draw on two distinct understandings of community; Benedict Anderson’s
imagined community and Celia Pearce’s community of play. Through analysis of guild charters,
fan-site interviews, the World of Warcraft Terms of Use Agreement, and the Battle.net Code of
Conduct document, I demonstrate how as communities of play, guilds are uniquely positioned to
shape the gaming experience of their members. In The Stonewall Family and The Spreading
Taint guilds, the use of citizenship as a tool plays a critical role in establishing meaningful and
inclusive social policies that translate to an equitable gaming environment.
In chapter four I will analyze the discourse surrounding free speech and hate speech in *World of Warcraft*. Through analysis of the *World of Warcraft* forums, guild charters, guild discipline policies, the *World of Warcraft* Terms of Use Agreement, and the Battle.net Code of Conduct document, I argue that the regulation and moderation of language are key aspects of creating an equitable gaming environment. Players have created player-moderated social spaces (guilds) to resist the idea that hate speech is ‘only words’ and that players disturbed by them should simply grow ‘thicker skin’.

In the concluding chapter, I will offer a brief summary of the major arguments in this thesis and some concluding thoughts. I will also offer some suggestions for further areas requiring study.
Chapter Two: The Precarious Position of LGBTQ Players in World of Warcraft

Introduction

“This is the gaming community and, by extent, the internet. Are you seriously trying to stop people from using the word [faggot] or gay, or joke on you for your voice?...I am quite sorry that people make fun of you...because of your voice or whatever, but just deal with it. There is nothing you can do about it, there is nothing [the people saying it] want to do about it, so just deal with it.” -Anonymous World of Warcraft player/forum participant (General Discussion, March 23rd 2013).

Judith Butler’s (2009) theory of precarity has been used in various contexts to gain a better understanding of marginalization, oppression, and collective action. Drawing on this theory, Jenson and De Castell (2013) argue that women are positioned as precarious subjects in video game culture. Although Butler (2009) explains that precarious populations are “at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement and of exposure to violence without protection”, Jenson and De Castell are careful to point out that playing, creating or consuming video games obviously does not come with the risk of death due to starvation or poor living conditions that Butler speaks to in her work (2). They do however argue that there is a very real problem of women being targeted by violence and aggression within the video game industry and culture. They argue further, that women are also not offered any type of institutional protections from the resulting harms of this violence and aggression. In the same piece, they put forth two examples of collective action, or what they call “grassroots counter-movements”, which are aimed at providing alternative protections (in lieu of institutional ones) and offering support for women in the video game industry and culture. As scholars documenting examples of resistance, Jenson and De Castell explain that they are “inventing equity” in a space that is inequitable and they challenge others to do the same. In a different context, Schram (2013) wrote an interesting piece about the Occupy movement, in which he suggests that “Butler’s focus on
precarity highlights how people’s shared vulnerability becomes a basis for achieving political agency by way of public performances that serve to represent the common interests of those being variously marginalized…” (np). Bringing bodies together in a public venue and uniting them on the basis of their individual experiences of precarity is what makes individual agency possible. He suggests that, “Perhaps it is only when the individual becomes part of the collective that political agency becomes manifest. Bodies must be in alliance before their political agency can be realized” (Schram 2013:np).

While Jenson and De Castell’s arguments focus mainly on women in video game culture, and Schram is writing about a context that is entirely different from video games, similar arguments can be made regarding LGBTQ players and precarity in World of Warcraft. Through an examination of one particular World of Warcraft forum thread and drawing on Butler’s (2009) theories of precarity and performativity, this chapter will demonstrate that LGBTQ players are positioned precariously in three persistent ways. First, through making players who experience harassment responsible for their own protection by insisting that they use the currently ineffective in-game reporting system to deal with violence and oppression. Second, by being told to leave ‘their’ sexuality out of the game although it is not a requirement for (normative) heterosexual players to do so. Third, through the insistence that homophobia is funny and that players should not be ‘offended’ by it, I will further demonstrate that Blizzard Entertainment ignores the precarity experienced by many LGBTQ players and in some cases even reinforces it. Although Blizzard Entertainment’s official stance is that their policies “are designed to foster fun, fair and safe game environments”, they have been demonstrably ineffective at creating such an environment for LGBTQ players (Reporting bad behavior and bad names, blizzard support forum, 2015). Players are regularly subjected to heteronormative and homophobic behaviour that
creates an atmosphere of hostility and oppression for anyone whose identity is situated outside of heterosexual (masculine) norms. Finally, I will demonstrate how players on the Proudmoore server continually work to relieve this state of precarity for LGBTQ players. This is accomplished mainly through the creation and maintenance of LGBTQ-friendly guilds where players are unlikely to feel excluded or chastised for their sexual preferences, as well as through server-wide community-building public events like the Proudmoore Pride Parade.

**Judith Butler’s Theory of Precarity**

Specifically, precarity refers to people and groups of people who “suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009:2). She adds that precarity, “also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection” (Butler 2009:2). Importantly, Butler’s notion of precarity is closely linked with her conception of performativity. Performativity, she says, is “repetition and ritual, which achieve its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 1990:94). In other words, the repetitive actions we perform and decisions we make as individuals reinforce our understanding of what we should do and why. Where performativity is an explanation of agency, precarity concerns the conditions over which individuals have no control. Butler highlights three questions born out of the link between performativity and precarity, “How does the unspeakable population speak and makes its claims? What kind of disruption is this within the field of power? And how can such populations lay claim to what they require?” (Butler 2009: 13). These three questions provide a helpful framework for exploring how players on the Proudmoore server have taken on the
responsibility of creating a fun, fair and safe gaming environment for themselves. Before that can be done, we have to first understand why LGBTQ players have been situated in this precarious position to begin with.

**Heteronormative and Homophobic Game Structure and Culture**

Academics have often suggested that online games present an opportunity for players to challenge normative understandings of gender. It has been argued that the creative nature of fantasy games in particular eliminates any requirement for game developers to include a gender binary in the structure of a game (Pulos 2013). However, while the potential exists for gender exploration or playfulness to be structurally embedded in video games, the majority of mainstream video game developers still structure their video games around a male/female heterosexual binary. In *World of Warcraft* specifically, players are required to select a male or female avatar during character creation (before they can actually play the game) and are presented with limited appearance customization options. The male avatars are stereotypically strong and hypermasculine in appearance, while the female characters are highly sexualized. Heteronormativity is written in to the game through story lines and quest objectives, normalizing heterosexuality and negating the existence of any alternative. The game structure is not solely responsible for generating players’ understandings of gender and sexuality in-game, but it certainly acts as a source from which players draw meaning. Heteronormativity is inherent in *World of Warcraft*’s design and structure, directly contributing to the culture encompassing the game.

Homophobic language is used regularly and heteronormative ignorance is rearticulated repeatedly in interactions between players in *World of Warcraft*. Although Blizzard Entertainment explicitly states that a player may not “Insultingly refer to any aspect of sexual
orientation pertaining to themselves or other players” this language can be seen regularly on the
official Blizzard World of Warcraft Forums and in-game (Blizzard, In-Game and Forum
Violations 2015). It is commonplace to hear\textsuperscript{11} a player use “gay” as a pejorative term in place of
just about any other negative adjective. When players confront someone for using homophobic
language, displaying heteronormative ignorance, or even simply when players attempt to initiate
a meaningful discussion surrounding LGBTQ players or concerns within the game, they are
typically met with a fervent flow of hate and/or rejection.

\textbf{Ooyl’s Plea to be Treated Like a Human}

Referring back to Fiske’s (1994) notion of discourse as a site of struggle, the struggle to
“gain access to public discourse in general or the media in particular – the struggle to make one’s
voice heard” can be seen over and over again in discussions concerning LGBTQ players and
communities (5). On January 5\textsuperscript{th} 2014 a player going by the character name Ooyl made this
forum post,

\begin{quote}
“I understand that in the real world, it’s not picture perfect and
I don’t expect it to be that way in this game. I’m not here to lecture
you or shove it down your throats but I’m here to tell you that there’s
injustice in this gaming community. In this community the lgbt
[player] is sometimes looked down upon. In trade this morning,
random kids were comparing the gay community to beastality and
that’s not right. We are regular people who enjoy World of Warcraft
just like the rest of you and our sexual preference does NOT affect
how we play. Please treat us like humans” (Ooyl, General Discussion,
January 5\textsuperscript{th} 2014, Msg.1).
\end{quote}

This particular forum post elicited 501 responses from players within eight hours, reaching
Blizzard’s ‘post limit’ for a given thread. As such the thread was locked and players were no
longer able to post comments or replies. Interestingly, for a topic that was so popular on the
\textsuperscript{11} For simplicity’s sake, the term “hear” also refers to seeing text for the duration of this paper.
forums, the opening post received 21 down-votes which triggered an automatic concealment of the post. In order to view the opening post, players had to actively ‘unhide’ it. In resorting to the forums as a venue for expressing frustration at the current social conditions within the game, Ooyl is struggling to give voice to a discourse that is not often heard and is regularly silenced within *World of Warcraft* culture. This post and the accompanying responses shed light on the precarity experienced by players who do not conform to heteronormative standards. Responders generally did not regard Ooyl’s concern as a problem that required attention or a solution outside of the individual experiencing the distress. The common responses made by players took three forms: 1) players witnessing vitriolic behaviour or experiencing harassment should report it to Blizzard and let the system take care of it; 2) that ‘[World of Warcraft]’s just a game’ and players should leave their (queer) sexuality out of it; and 3) ‘they’re just trolling you’, ‘grow a thicker skin’.

Firstly, one common ‘solution’ typically suggested to Ooyl by other players was to report the inappropriate behaviour to Blizzard Entertainment through the in-game reporting function. Keeping in mind that Blizzard Entertainment aims for a “fun, fair and safe game environment”, they advise that, “If you [a player] see another player violate these policies, please immediately report the incident to a Game Master for investigation” (Reporting bad behavior and bad names, blizzard support forum, 2015). Effectively, players are encouraging Ooyl to trust and rely on a system that has been perpetually failing to foster the gaming environment it claims to pursue. Although the players instigating this ‘bad behavior’ as Blizzard Entertainment calls it, may eventually be reprimanded, the current policies clearly do not foster the “fun, fair and safe game environment” they are supposed to for everyone. A frustrated player writes in one forum post, “Blizzard: if you are not going to enforce the ToS regarding language, please consider rewriting
it to reflect what you ARE going to enforce. It seems reasonable to me that players have the right to expect the gaming atmosphere that your ToS incorrectly suggests we will have” (Nebliina, General discussion, September 19th, 2012, Msg. 140). Like Nebliina, many players have made forum posts calling for stronger enforcement of the current policies or some kind of change to better protect current players, however, they are almost always met with a response that the existing mechanism for dealing with ‘bad behavior’ is sufficient. The existing reporting process is a reactive one, where players who witness another player breaching official game policy are burdened with the responsibility to submit a report to Blizzard Entertainment (Reporting bad behavior and bad names, blizzard support forum, 2015). There is no further information provided about how the report is handled after submission other than to say that a game master will investigate. It should also be noted that there is an option for players to ‘ignore’ another player. This is done by right clicking on the offending player’s name and then selecting the ignore option. From that point until the player removes the ignored name from their ‘ignore list’, anything the ignored player types in-game will be invisible to the player who is ignoring them. The ignored player can however use another character to speak to the person ignoring them or have other players repeat their messages. The ignore function is also not account wide, meaning that if a player wants to ensure they never have to hear from a particularly offensive player again, they would have to stop what they are doing, log-in to each of their own characters and repeat the ignore process for each one individually.

Given that many players have the impression that the in-game reporting function does not make a difference in their play experience, it is unlikely that they will continually submit reports. It is also reasonable to assume that being required to submit frequent reports to Blizzard Entertainment in order to police other players would erode the supposedly ‘fun’ experience the
player is supposed to be having. By placing the burden on players targeted by bigotry to report
the incidents, Blizzard Entertainment is reinforcing their precarious position within World of
Warcraft culture. This precarity is seen particularly when victims of harassment and bigotry are
blamed by other players for not using in-game reporting enough.

Secondly, another common form of advice given to Ooyl was that “No one gives two
$#$@$s leave it outside the game” (Moredrasia, General Discussion, January 5th 2014, Msg.51).
The suggestion is similar to the reasoning behind the recently repealed ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ US
military policy; if players do not have to consider the idea that other players may identify as
LGBT or Q, straight players will not feel uncomfortable and therefore will not participate in
hostile behaviour towards them. Under the ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy, lesbian and gay people
were only allowed to serve in the US military if they kept their sexual orientation hidden from
others (Trivette 2010). Part of the justification for the policy was grounded in the assumption that
heterosexual personnel would be uncomfortable serving with openly homosexual personnel and
this would disrupt social cohesion putting the military’s effectiveness at risk (Trivette 2010). In
World of Warcraft this same assumption is exemplified by comments like, “If anything, the
LGBT [community]shoves themselves down everyone’s throats. I have nothing against gay
people, but they want to be treated equally right? But they are always the first to reveal their
sexual orientation” (Kwizzlix, General Discussion, January 5th 2014, Msg. 57). In a military
context, personnel are expected to form strong friendships and social bonds with their comrades
through sharing and a lack of personal privacy, creating a paradox for personnel who were
required to maintain secrecy about their identity. The policy’s purpose was to promote solidarity
and social cohesion among military personnel, but instead it created tension and forced people to
lie about their personal life and hide parts of themselves in fact weakening social connections (Trivette 2010).

Similar to the problems with the ‘don’t ask don’t tell policy’, there are several ways suggestions that LGBTQ players should leave sexuality out of the game are problematic. First, World of Warcraft is a highly social game and general information about players’ personal lives can be difficult to conceal. Players (especially guild-mates) frequently spend time chatting about topics unrelated to the game as they complete in-game tasks and activities. When someone tells an LGBTQ player to leave sexuality out of the game, they are denying them the claim to the social existence in World of Warcraft that attracts so many players to the game in the first place. As the player Kanzeon explains, “Gay people aren’t going to shove their lifestyle down your throat…It might be a mere mention of a guy saying, ‘Okay guys, boyfriend aggro\textsuperscript{12}, gotta go~’ This instantly outs them as gay (assuming people know he is male), which can and does lead to problems in WoW. Why should a gay or transgender person have to hide?” (Kanzeon, General Discussion, march 24\textsuperscript{th} 2013, Msg.483). This sentiment about not wanting to hide who they are was common in forum posts and interview comments made by players indicating that it is an important part of the World of Warcraft social experience. Second, the idea of leaving sexuality out of the game is firmly entrenched in a heteronormative perspective where heterosexuality is so common it is no longer perceived as sexuality. As mentioned previously, heterosexuality is firmly embedded in World of Warcraft. For example, male quest-givers\textsuperscript{13} require players to rescue their missing wives, non-player characters flirt with each other during interactions, and

\textsuperscript{12} Aggro is a reference to an in-game mechanic where hostile mobs will target the player who has generated the highest amount of threat. In this context Kanzeon is referring to a player being required to remove themselves from immediate play because someone outside of the game wants their attention; in this case it is a boyfriend.

\textsuperscript{13} Quests are tasks that are given to players to complete in exchange for rewards. They are also one of the main mechanisms through which Blizzard Entertainment is able to propel the storylines of the game. Players embark on these quests after interacting with non-player characters, or quest-givers.
players play out a quest line that culminates in an epic cut scene in which Thrall, one of the most prominent non-player characters in one of the main storylines, marries his female romantic interest Aggra. This is not to say that the game does not also include sexually driven content that is non-gender specific. Flirtatious actions (character animations) and sayings are written into the code of the game to be used by players at their leisure, and there is an annual week long in-game Valentine’s Day celebration where players can participate in events, gain rewards, and earn achievements through participation with whoever the player chooses. The idea that any player, regardless of their sexual preferences, should (or even could) leave sexuality out of World of Warcraft is impractical to the point of absurdity. The idea that people who identify as LGBTQ should leave ‘their’ sexuality out of the game reinforces their precarity by encouraging social distancing between themselves and other players, decreasing sociality and increasing their vulnerability.

Thirdly, other players simply equated Ooyl’s experience with trolling, or any other kind of grieving, rather than acknowledging the homophobia Ooyl was experiencing in trade chat. Bishop (2013) defines trolling as the “sending of provocative mess-ages via a communications platform for the entertainment of oneself, others, or both” (302). He points out that since the mid-1990s ‘trolling’ has been used to describe intentionally transgressive humor, but that more recently it is becoming equated with more abusive behaviour. A player going by the name Nixxia exemplifies this common player response by saying “[trolls] will say whatever it takes to upset someone. It may be !@$%^*!@*ity today, women tomorrow, and everyone the day after with Hitler worship. That’s what trolling is” (Nixxia, General Discussion, January 5th 2014, Msg. 26). In saying homophobic speech is simply a way for players to provoke a reaction the same as any other confrontational speech, players whose responses are similar to Nixxia’s are shifting the
focus of the discussion from Ooyl’s plea for a more equitable gaming space to the dominant discourse of normalized homophobia. Rather than placing importance on the discomfort, frustration and/or misery for players targeted by homophobia, players like Nixxia are suppressing that discourse by bringing the ‘humor’ back to the fore of the discussion. Because Ooyl is speaking from a position at the fringe of established sexuality norms about other people holding a similarly precarious position, Ooyl’s request that LGBTQ players should be treated more fairly is not taken seriously and is dismissed by many players.

Mitigating Precarity on Proudmoore

Given the overt hostility that many LGBTQ players face in World of Warcraft, some players actively seek out guilds that advertise themselves as ‘LGBTQ friendly’ to find a place where they can play the game free from harassment. When players search for LGBTQ friendly guilds through the World of Warcraft forums they are more often than not met with suggestions to try out guilds on the Proudmoore server. One player, Nebliina, illustrates her experience as a self-identified lesbian playing World of Warcraft, “Much as I immediately loved this game, I was treated to the most obnoxious homophobia a virtual environment can provide. I hopped from realm to realm, simply cringing at what I was putting up with…in silence…to enjoy a game” (Nebliina, Gaming, Hardware, and Entertainment, August 26th 2014. Msg. 182). Later in her post she echoes what many other players have written saying, “Finally, I came to Proudmoore, which as many know does not support a homophobic culture. It might be the only realm that is proactively non-homophobic” (Nebliina, Gaming, Hardware, and Entertainment, August 26th 2014. Msg. 182). Proudmoore attracts players from around the world who want to play the game free from the heteronormative and homophobic culture that permeates the majority of World of Warcraft realms. The server has earned this ‘proactively non-homophobic’ reputation and the
unofficial LGBTQ server status largely in part to the guilds that call Proudmoore home. It is partially through the creation and maintenance of guilds like The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint that LGBTQ players on Proudmoore are able to speak and make their claims, disrupt the heteronormative field of power, and lay claim to their social existence in a fair and fun gaming environment.

In the case of The Stonewall Family, the name of the guild and its logo can be interpreted as acts of resistance and a demonstration of the desire for collective solidarity. The name gives reference to the Stonewall uprising in 1969 where for the first time in the US LGBTQ people collectively fought back against state oppression and violence (PBS 2011). The Stonewall Inn was a mafia-run gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York City; a rare place where people could be openly queer. At the time it was illegal for an establishment to serve alcohol to LGBTQ people or for LGBTQ people to dance together, as such the establishment was raided regularly by city police (The Stonewall Inn 2015). On June 28th 1969, police came to raid The Stonewall Inn, but instead of the usual compliance they received from the patrons, they were confronted with people resisting arrest and fighting back. Protests continued and grew in size over the next several nights marking the Stonewall Uprising as the beginning of the US gay rights movement (The Stonewall Inn 2015). By naming the guild The Stonewall Family, the founding members are signaling to other players that they support and struggle for LGBTQ equity in World of Warcraft. Since player’s guild tags are displayed above their avatars in-game and under the player’s name in forums, the guild name is a constant reminder to players who
come across The Stonewall Family members of their discursive struggle to be heard and recognized. The guild logo (Figure 1) is a rainbow coloured lion’s head. In many cultures, lions are thought to symbolize bravery, valour, and strength. The rainbow colouring is a reference to the rainbow flag or LGBTQ pride flag. Rainbow coloring has become commonly understood as representative of LGBTQ pride. The Stonewall Family also sells clothing with variations of their logo on it as a means of financially supporting their website and VoIP servers (The Stonewall Family Gaymer Gear Shop 2015).

Both The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint – Rough Trade Gaming Community promote their guilds as a ‘safe space’ for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and Straight friends and allies who are 18 years old or older to play World of Warcraft, be social, and have fun (The Stonewall Family Charter 2015; Rough Trade Gaming Community Charter 2015). Each guild has a guild charter which every member has read and has agreed to abide by before being admitted to the guild. These charters are a large part of what offers members protection from homophobic violence in-game and acts as the mechanism through which players can collectively promote and police the behaviour of other players. At the same time, the precariousness of LGBTQ players can still be seen in the way the charters are written. Both charters explicitly state that players must adhere to all official game policies and rules which is not typically something included in most guild charters. The Stonewall Family Charter says, “The guild’s leadership does not judge anyone for what they choose to do in their free time, however discussion of activities that are illegal (such as marijuana use) can be viewed by Blizzard as violation of the ToS and as a result can cause them to disband a guild” (Stonewall Family Charter 2015). Given the history of Blizzard Entertainment’s reaction to LGBTQ guilds and the obstacles Sara Andrews faced, it is understandable that the guild’s leadership would be cautious in not giving Blizzard
Entertainment any grounds on which to justify disbanding the guild. Another way the precarity of LGBTQ players shows through these charters is in the way they both emphasize representing not only their respective guilds, but also the broader LGBTQ community. The Spreading Taint calls their members ambassadors, and The Stonewall Family emphasizes their diplomatic relations with other guilds. Each guild is careful to point out the potential consequences of not being friendly to players in game and stresses the requirement that members be respectful, polite, and that they follow Blizzard Entertainment’s rules.

Arguably one of the most boisterous and obvious ways these guilds work together to represent LGBTQ players, give voice to queer discourses, and claim space within the game is through the organization and execution of the Proudmoore Pride Parade. Like other Pride Parades around the world, the Proudmoore Pride event is held annually in June. The Spreading Taint started the parade in 2005 and it has been growing in popularity since (Proudmoore Pride 2013). The organizers of the parade and subsequent in-game party make sure to be clear that the event is open to all players. For those who are unable to attend the parade or even those who are curious about it but not curious enough to attend, organizers provide Twitch streams and online radio coverage of the event. Because of recent technological changes to World of Warcraft, players from servers other than Proudmoore are able to form groups with Proudmoore players and temporarily transfer their avatars to Proudmoore to attend with the help and planning of event organizers. The organizers also use a combination of an in-game chat add-on and the creation of temporary guilds to facilitate a common chat channel for all Proudmoore Pride attendees (Paldadin, Proudmoore, May 19th 2014, Msg. 1). By enabling chat in this way rather than using an open world channel, the event organizers retain control over who can participate in

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14 An add-on or modification is software created separate from World of Warcraft, but integrated with the game to alter it in some way to suit player’s needs.
chat, assumedly to prevent unwelcome players from trolling or creating any kind of hateful disruption to the celebration. Outside of Proudmoore, the parade has received press coverage via several World of Warcraft fan-sites and also some larger video game news hubs. The high level of publicity for the event attracts attention to Proudmoore as a server that promotes gaming equity and also to the presence of the LGBTQ community in World of Warcraft as a whole. As player Benjamin Hardin says in an interview, “I think it is important to remind other players that the person behind the avatar next to yours in –game might not want to hear you say how “gay” something that you dislike is” (Hugh Ryan, interview with Benjamin Hardin aka Bigheadben, June 10th 2009, advocate.com).

In past years, organizers have used Proudmoore Pride as a venue for circulating discourse that otherwise is not brought into the purview of most players. As reflected by the invitation (figure 2), the 2013 Proudmoore Pride parade was themed to reflect the pursuit of marriage equality (Proudmoore Pride 2013). Participants were encouraged to attend the parade with their avatars dressed in what would commonly be perceived of as wedding attire. The in-game parade disrupts normal gameplay for players who witness it, prompting the potential to generate a conversation or at least provoke thought about marriage equality. In a social space

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15 The parade does not disrupt players in such a way that they are unable to play the game in a whatever way they choose, but rather it is an unusual sight and would shift the player’s focus and likely pique their curiosity.
where many people believe discourse about sexuality has no place, Proudmoore Pride makes non-normative sexuality the focus, bringing the marginalized to the centre, even if only for a short time. Similarly, in 2009 the Proudmoore Pride Parade was themed around female-identified players in an effort to draw attention to the fact that although World of Warcraft culture is hypermasculine in many ways, women and girls play the game too. A Proudmoore Pride participant explains his thoughts on the 2009 theme,

Every gay person understands what it is like to be the minority in a social situation, and because female players are definitely a small but growing subset in online gaming, I want to communicate that the Spreading Taint isn't just a club for gay boys. Our female players rock, plain and simple. Despite the variety of folks in the Taint, we do skew mostly male, and I appreciate that it likely takes a great sense of humor and an awesome set of ovaries to so cheerfully put up with our incessant penis chat. Asking the girls to be the lead float in this year's Pride parade is our version of Dykes on Bikes, kinda (Hugh Ryan, interview with Benjamin Hardin aka Bigheadben, June 10th 2009, advocate.com).

Through events like Proudmoore Pride, players work to bring attention to groups of players or relevant issues that otherwise might receive none. In so doing, they create an atmosphere of fun and inclusion for those who may often feel like they are sitting on the sidelines.

Conclusion

Many World of Warcraft players have found themselves in a hostile, homophobic gaming environment where Blizzard Entertainment fails to deliver the gaming experience they promote through their official discourse. When players attempt to raise concerns regarding these unequitable conditions from a position of precarity, they are frequently confronted with re-articulations of the dominant heteronormative and homophobic discourse that circulates through World of Warcraft culture. On the Proudmoore server however, players have come together to
diminish the precarity experienced by LGBTQ players and to provide a space where dominant discourses are challenged. A player by the name of TempestsRay describes the atmosphere on Proudmoore,

Proudmoore is LGBT friendly. By this I mean Homophobia is pretty much not tolerate[d] and those [who] try to harass people or are a bigot get shouted down and reported pretty quickly. A lot of guild’s are LGBT friendly so you will not be harassed or made to feel uncomfortable about who you are. Proudmoore is somewhere [you] can play and feel safe and not feel you have to hide who you are (TempestsRay, General Discussion, January 5th 2014, Msg. 29).

The accepting and friendly reputation that Proudmoore enjoys is largely made possible through the efforts of several guilds on the server that work to publicly and actively promote an alternative social experience to that offered by Blizzard Entertainment. Much of this work is seen in the way(s) these guilds manage their communities, demonstrating the need for a more thorough exploration of these guilds, their policies, and notions of community within World of Warcraft. This distinction between the World of Warcraft experience and a World of Warcraft - on Proudmoore experience also raises the question - why are Proudmoore guilds so effective in creating a fun, fair and safe gaming environment for their members when Blizzard Entertainment is not? In the following chapter, I will explore this question in some detail using The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint guilds as case studies and through an examination of community in World of Warcraft.
Chapter Three: Community and Citizenship in World of Warcraft

Introduction

Commonly held understandings of what constitutes a community can be quite ambiguous. The notion of a community is often linked to a geographic territory, like a neighbourhood block or a nation. As a concept in social research, community has played a prominent role in a long history of Western social thought. Early ideas about community can be found as early as ancient Greece in the writings of Plato and Aristotle (Bruhn 2004). In the 19th century European sociologists fiercely debated the role of cities and increased industrialization in the creation, changing, and/or demise of community as a physical place (Kelly and Caputo 2011). Since the proliferation of online technologies however, communities have also been conceived of as being linked through ideas or practices rather than solely through geography or place (Pearce 2009; Rambukkana 2007). Similarly our understanding of place has been challenged by the technologically networked reality that so many people are now a part of. Wellman (1999) describes communities as a network of relationships rather than a physical place. He suggests that what defines a community is the meaning people derive from the relationships that bring the community into existence.

Online games such as World of Warcraft once again encourage us to question our assumptions about what a community is and how they operate. World of Warcraft players circulate within and between several communities at any given time and each of these communities is tied to certain aspects of identity. Players may identify with and feel they are a part of the broader gaming community, the World of Warcraft community, their server’s community, a guild community, or a variety of other communities represented in-game (e.g. the
LGBTQ community). The ways players interact and participate within these various communities greatly influences their understanding and experience of *World of Warcraft* culture and the meaning they derive from the game. Two frameworks for understanding community are particularly helpful in the *World of Warcraft* context; Benedict Anderson’s (2006) imagined communities and Celia Pearce’s (2009) communities of play. Using Anderson’s imagined community as a framework, Sherman (2011) posed the question “could something akin to national identity exist within an online virtual world?” (33). While you would be hard pressed to make a convincing argument that *World of Warcraft* could be considered a nation, it would be equally difficult to argue that *World of Warcraft* players do not have a shared identity.

Considering *World of Warcraft* through the lens of an imagined community is helpful in understanding this shared identity. Conversely, Pearce’s notion of a community of play is helpful in understanding guild communities. Communities of play are born out of online game spaces and often grow to transcend a specific game (Pearce 2009). As communities of play, guilds are uniquely positioned to shape the gaming experience of their members. For The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint, the concept of citizenship within these communities of play performs a critical role in upholding meaningful and inclusive social policies that translate to an equitable gaming environment for their members.

Through an examination of The Stonewall Family Charter and The Spreading Taint Charter as well as interviews with their members, this chapter will demonstrate how the Proudmoore guilds’ social policies construct individuals’ experiences of difference as a shared identity and a core value of their communities. Conversely, through an examination of Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft* Terms of Use agreement and support forums, I will argue that Blizzard Entertainment’s social policies essentially promote tension between players
because of an inherent conflict between the company’s desire for economic success and the other values they claim to uphold through their discourse. Drawing on Joppke’s (2010) understanding of citizenship as membership in a political community and Marshall’s (1992) understanding of social citizenship as the equality associated with being part of a community, I will further demonstrate how using citizenship as a tool to allow or deny access to these communities is a central factor in what allows the Proudmoore guilds to sustain an equitable gaming environment for their players while Blizzard Entertainment fails to do so effectively.

It is important to recognize that while it can be argued (and is here) that communities and citizenship can be powerful tools for establishing equity, they also create boundaries and can establish borders that create conditions of exclusion. In her work on the moral and emotional regulation of antiracism and feminism, Srivastava (2005) points out that “social movements require a vision not only of a community of individuals but also of shared ideas, morals, and ethics” (34). This holds true in the context of The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint within World of Warcraft as well. In creating their communities, the Proudmoore guilds have established and continue to maintain boundaries that leave some players out. Some scholars have pointed out how citizenship works as a tool of oppression by privileging some people and exploiting others. Glenn (2000) argues that in creating citizens, non-citizens are also created and that inequality is inherent in the relationship between them (Glenn 2000). Anderson, Sharma and Wright (2009) reject the notion of citizenship and nations entirely arguing that national borders create inequality and can increase vulnerability and precarity for migrants. While it is important to acknowledge the potential oppression that can result from utilizing citizenship as a tool within communities, in this particular context, citizenship is being extended to those who are arguably most vulnerable and in need of its protection.
World of Warcraft: an Imagined Community

Anderson (2006) describes a nation as an imagined community that is limited and sovereign, made up of people who may not know each other, where inequality and exploitation exist but which is still conceived of as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). One of the key aspects of an imagined community is that its members feel that they have a shared intimate knowledge of each other regardless of whether or not they have ever met face to face. For Anderson, mass media and shared language act as catalysts for disseminating the knowledge required for an imagined community to exist.

World of Warcraft meets these criteria in several ways. The World of Warcraft community is limited to those who have access to the game and its rules and regulations are ultimately governed by Blizzard Entertainment. The players who constitute this imagined community might know each other in person, but most do not; similarly they might interact or know each other in-game, but in a community of over 10 million players, most people are strangers. Like outside the game, inequality exists. Players come from all walks of life; in World of Warcraft people from different social and economic classes, from different cultures, and from different backgrounds find themselves interacting and playing together frequently (Consalvo 2009). It is through a shared knowledge of the game and its culture that players are able to imagine this community into existence. A prominent part of this shared knowledge is the use of World of Warcraft specific language. The fictional worlds of Azeroth and Draenor\(^\text{16}\) are not only full of places, characters, stories, and lore but have also necessitated the creation of terms necessary for communication regarding in-game mechanics and strategies. This knowledge is not only shared through the technologically mediated game itself, but is also disseminated through

\(^{16}\) Azeroth and Draenor are the fictional worlds in which World of Warcraft takes place.
wikis, forums, fan-sites, novels, comics, fan generated content, and events such as Blizzcon\textsuperscript{17}. It is through \textit{World of Warcraft} subscriptions and these communication platforms that both players and the employees of Blizzard Entertainment are able to imagine the \textit{World of Warcraft} community.

\textbf{Communities of Play: The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint}

There are several defining aspects of a community of play that differentiate it from other conceptualizations of community. Pearce (2009) draws on Huizinga’s description of play as a non-serious activity that is separate from ordinary life but absorbs the player intensely, and Tönnies’s idea of community as a group of people who individually act out a collective will, to ground the term community of play (5). She intentionally uses the term “community of play” in place of Wenger’s notion of a community of practice, arguing that “play practices warrant their own understanding of how communities form and are maintained, a subject that becomes particularly pertinent in the context of technologically mediated play” (Pearce 2009:5). She rejects the negative connotations often associated with play as being wasteful or childish. Instead, arguing that play is highly social and productive both through the requirement of creative capacity and through the necessity of community building (Pearce 2009). Borrowing from Csikszentmihályi’s concept of flow and DeKoven’s concept of CoLiberation, Pearce discusses the concept of intersubjective flow as integral to a community of play. Csikszentmihályi’s flow is “the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfilment” (Pearce 2009:130). CoLiberation deals with the balance between an individual and a community or isolation and conformity (Pearce 2009). Pearce’s notion of intersubjective flow is when these feelings of flow occur between individuals rather

\textsuperscript{17} Blizzcon is an annual convention hosted by Blizzard Entertainment where the company releases information about their upcoming games and products.
than within an individual. Intersubjective flow she says, “serves to accelerate a form of intimacy that is unique to play” (Pearce 2009:133). The final aspect of a community of play is group cohesion which is an integral part of a community of play and is substantiated through shared values.

The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint both satisfy the criteria of a community of play in several ways. Both guilds are based around playing World of Warcraft in a social environment with particular collective goals; namely to provide an inclusive space for LGBTQ players without any of the common heteronormativity and harassment commonly found in World of Warcraft. These guilds deal with tension between individual and group identity by centering difference as the foundation of their group identity. When asked why sexual orientation has any relevance to an online gaming guild, player Venfelder responds,

“The idea of a GLBT guild is really no different than guilds formed by a core of college students at the same school, a group of hardcore PvPers, or those guilds formed on a strict diet of raiding. Taint is essentially just the same, but with its core values and purpose comprised of non-discrimination, acceptance and social interaction. Whereas the other guilds may insert "PvP guild," "raiding guild" or "late-night UCLA guild" into their descriptive headlines, Taint's simply reads differently: a casual and accepting environment for the GLBT community and the straight folk we call friends.” (Poisso, interview with Venfelder, engadget 2008)

Incorporating difference is important to these guilds not only in terms of sexuality, but also in terms of playstyle. The Spreading Taint, as part of the wider Rough Trade Gaming Community, advertises on their website,

“We welcome all of our 18+ Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and Straight friends and allies to our guilds with opportunities for both casual and hard-core gamers...Now, over a decade after we first
started, our mission remains the same: to provide a consistent, dependable, friendly, and fun social experience for our members…The Spreading Taint series of guilds on Proudmoore provides something for everyone, now offering both Horde and Alliance guilds!” (Rough Trade Gaming Community2015).

The description points out that regardless of the player’s playstyle, initiates and members will find others in the guild who enjoy the same activities. This is important for developing occurrences of intersubjective flow which is the foundation of closeness within online gaming guilds. Intersubjective flow is achieved between players who share an identity based on shared values (i.e. guild identity) while doing enjoyable in-game activities together. The Stonewall Family advertises something similar, “The Stonewall Family meta-guild was created to provide a “safe space” for adult (18+) LGBT players and their friends/allies to game within Azeroth, make social connections, and have an overall good time with people who have similar interests” (The Stonewall Family Guild Charter 2015). While difference is a focus for both guilds, there is much more involved in defining them as distinct communities. These guilds both refer to themselves as families in several areas of their websites indicating the type of intimacy Pearce (2009) refers to in her discussion of communities of play. Venfelder elaborates on his/her experience of being a member of The Spreading Taint,

“Personally, being a member of Taint for so long has really changed my outlook on gaming and game-based online communities as a whole. So much good can be done for someone who is looking for an escape in the vein of which WoW provides, someone who may also be lucky enough to find a home like Taint provides: a haven for expression, friendship and acceptance that they may be lacking elsewhere. We all feel different for different reasons, but here at Taint, none of that matters. The guild has become a new sub-definition of the word "community"” (Poisso, interview with Venfelder, engadget 2008).
Venfelder makes the distinction between The Spreading Taint and other game-based communities emphasizing that the reason s/he prefers this community to others is grounded in the values espoused by The Spreading Taint. Another The Spreading Taint member, Wayneston Harbeson describes the importance of guilds like The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint,

“To be able to band together and feel comfortable and talk how we want to talk…it really brings us together. And I think you know, wow with having with such a huge player base really brought a lot of people who don’t have the opportunity to even get together with gay people and [allows them] to socialize with them in game and that’s pretty powerful” (Wayneston Harbeson interview 2014).

The shared values that gel these guilds together and work to maintain group cohesion are easily discernable from their respective guild charters. They each emphasize the privilege of being a member of their guild (and that it is a privilege that can be taken away), the necessity to advance inclusivity within World of Warcraft culture, and the requirement that players respect both each other as well as players outside the guild. Ironically, the very goal of creating an equitable and inclusive gaming environment for their members relies on the practice of excluding people from participation. Both guilds refer to membership in their guild as citizenship. Considering membership in these communities of play to be a form of citizenship can have some interesting implications and merits further thought.

**The Place of Citizenship in World of Warcraft**

Citizenship has been used in a great many contexts with a variety of meanings and applications. The one commonality in most uses of the concept is that it refers to membership in a political community (Joppke 2010). In general, citizenship involves debates concerning status,
rights and identity; Who can hold citizenship? What rights are afforded to citizens? What does being a citizen of a particular community mean? How are citizens different from non-citizens? Historically, the purpose of citizenship has been to provide security and protection to those who hold it (Joppke 2010). It also allows its members to operate within a defined space and to access resources that typically cannot be accessed by others. Marshall (1992) defines social citizenship as “basic human equality associated with the concept of full membership of a community” (6). He further articulates that it “requires…a direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to a civilization which is a common possession” (Marshall 1992:24). This version of citizenship is particularly helpful for understanding how guilds are uniquely positioned to shape their member’s gaming experience.

Referring to membership as citizenship in The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint is quite fitting for numerous reasons. Much like current day nations that offer liberal citizenship, there is a bureaucratic process to obtaining citizen status within these guilds. This process is used to determine who merits admittance to the community. Before a player can become a member of either guild, they must first submit a formal application through the respective guild’s website, which is then assessed by guild officers (The Stonewall Family Membership Process & Guidelines 2015; The Rough Trade Gaming Meta-Guild Application 2015). Both applications require that applicants read and agree to adhere to the guild’s charter and to explain why they wish to join an LGBTQ friendly guild. Further The Stonewall family has applicants type the following statement on their application, “I am 100% comfortable in a diverse social guild that includes gay, lesbian, str8, bisexual, transgendered & questioning members” (The Stonewall Family Guild Application Form 2015). The applications also request information regarding the player’s membership in past guild(s) and the reason(s) for leaving
them. The information gathered from these applications is very specific and allows guild leadership to make informed decisions about whether they believe the applicant shares the same values the community embraces and also whether or not they will adhere to the guild’s charter. The Stonewall Family takes the process one step further and includes a 14 to 21 day probationary period for new members (The Stonewall Family Membership Process & Guidelines 2015). During this time, initiates are restricted from access to the guild bank (material guild resources) and are expected to prove to current members that they are worthy of membership. Upon successful completion of the probationary period, initiates are promoted to the rank of “family member”. This application process, and in The Stonewall Family’s case probationary period, allow the guilds to be selective in who they admit into their community, sets clear expectations for its members about what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Most importantly, this process likely insulates members from other players who engage in homophobic practices. While this strategy of admittance may seem exclusionary on the surface, a closer look at the guild charters demonstrates the inclusive nature of these particular guilds as well as the protections they offer their members.

The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint – Rough Trade Gaming Community guild charters each provide simple and yet clear rules that inform what types of behaviour are acceptable within their communities and what types of behaviour are not. Both charters essentially rearticulate the rules and regulations set by Blizzard Entertainment that are meant to be followed by all World of Warcraft players. Where the guild charters diverge from official Blizzard Entertainment discourse is through their heavy emphasis on respect and diversity, the specific moderation of guild chat channels, and the citizenship related policies. Within Blizzard Entertainment’s imagined World of Warcraft community, there are very specific policies
regarding harassment, however, they do not require players to treat each other with respect. They also do not actively encourage diversity as something that should be valued. Instead their policies seem to be designed to prevent players from directly threatening each other and to promote at least a begrudging tolerance of others. In contrast, The Stonewall Family Charter says, “Members of The Stonewall Family are expected to treat each other with respect at all times. Diversity is one of the cornerstones of why The Stonewall Family exists, and we celebrate the diversity throughout our own community as well as others” (The Stonewall Family Charter 2015). As a member of The Stonewall Family or The Spreading Taint, players are guaranteed to be part of a gaming environment where other players will treat them with respect. Players who are unable to be respectful are removed from these guilds and denied access to their communities. Because of the relatively small number of players in guilds compared to the entire World of Warcraft player base, the guilds are able to proactively monitor and moderate their chat channels. Officers are able to oversee public conversations and intervene if and when conversations or language begin to tread on the guild’s established charter rules. This is not to say that guild chat channels are strictly censored, but rather that if any type of harassment or prejudice occurs it is halted immediately. The guild charters make a clear distinction between being harassed and being offended. The Stonewall Family highlights this by saying, “The Stonewall Family's officers have no desire to babysit guild chat, unless members are being disrespected, abused publicly or the charter is otherwise being broken” (The Stonewall Family Guild Charter 2015). Both guilds are quick to point out that given the diversity in their communities, it is likely that conversations will occur at some point in which individual players disagree or may be offended. Players are encouraged to either ignore the conversation entirely or to try to work out their differences so long as it is done in a respectful manner. This is very
different from Blizzard Entertainment’s option to put a player on ignore and/or to report them. Guild officers assume the responsibility of moderating guild chat so that the citizens of their guilds are not burdened with that responsibility and instead can focus all of their energy on enjoying the game and the community.

Interestingly, The Stonewall Family has specific policies regarding dual-citizenship, leaving the guild and re-joining the guild after having left. If a player wishes to have one character in The Stonewall Family and another in a different guild, The Stonewall Family considers this dual-citizenship. They have a very strict policy of not allowing their members to maintain dual citizenship with guilds that they are not on friendly terms with. In their own words, “If you are found to violate this policy, or we determine that you are recruiting our members for the guild you are dual-citizenship’d with – you will be shown the door quickly, plain and simple” (The Stonewall Family Membership Process & Guidelines 2015). If a player has a character that has been inactive for over two months, the character is removed from the guild. Should all of a players characters be removed this way, the player is required to submit a new application and serve another probationary period upon admittance. Leaving the guild for another guild, then trying to re-join is frowned upon and seen as showing disrespect to other guild members. When a member does decide to leave, they are expected to do so quickly and quietly without causing dissention within the guild. Finally both guilds ask if new applicants have previously been members of the guild, presumably to use prior information regarding their membership as part of the admission decision. These policies demonstrate the continuous process of maintaining and reproducing the communities of play. They also point to the fact that while the players do not come out explicitly and say it in their charter, or even elsewhere on their websites, loyalty is another value central to these communities of play. Collectively, the group expects its members
to assume guild citizenship as part of their individual identity, which in turn works to sustain the
guild’s collective identity. When a citizen sheds their individual identity as a member it is
interpreted as a betrayal of the collective.

**How does citizenship translate to equity (or not)?**

While Blizzard Entertainment does not make any references to citizenship in *World of Warcraft*
or any of the related discourse, the company refers to the *World of Warcraft* community regularly. The company also refers to player’s access to the forums as a “privilege and not a right” (Battle.net Code of Conduct 2015). Like guild leadership in their communities of play, Blizzard Entertainment has absolute control over who can and who cannot participate in their imagined *World of Warcraft* community. There are established rules and regulations for members to follow and (sometimes) consequences for those who do not. Blizzard Entertainment claims to advocate similar values to those articulated by The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint, however, there is clearly a significant difference in the (social) gaming environment experienced by players through guild communication channels versus those moderated primarily by Blizzard Entertainment employees. Although it is often left unarticulated in *World of Warcraft* culture, the very nature of Blizzard Entertainment’s existence as a corporate entity necessitates the incorporation of economic success as a predominant, if not the most important, value they uphold.

One way this can be interpreted is through Blizzard Entertainment’s strict enforcement of real-life threats versus the more relaxed moderation of bigotry and in-game harassment. Real-life threats have potential physical effects which could potentially result in more serious economic repercussions such as lawsuits or negative media coverage. Negative press is a particularly salient threat to the company’s profits given the media’s propensity to cling to the idea of video
games in general as violent and often portraying them as a threat to the social fabric of society. Conversely, in-game harassment and prejudice can more easily be shrugged off by saying the problem is a wider gaming culture or ‘internet’ problem, or by claiming that players are not at risk because hate and bigotry are ‘only words’.

Essentially, economic success is not inherently compatible with the other values Blizzard Entertainment purports to advocate in their official discourse, effectively limiting the company’s ability to deliver the type of gaming environment they promote. Joppke (2010) points out similar issues in his discussion of citizenship in current day liberal nations, saying

“The grand sociology of Talcot Parsons, who had argued…that integration occurs through shared cultural values, is discredited. Michael Mann (1970) points out that values such as “equality” and “achievement” are too general to legitimate any concrete social structure; that in embodying absolute standards they bear no compromise and thus are likely to breed conflict rather than cohesion…” (113).

With over 10 million subscribers, employing sufficient staff to actively moderate chat channels in an effort to ensure players are adhering to the game’s social policies would likely be extremely costly. Also, given that World of Warcraft culture is so rife with prejudice of every sort, there would likely be further economic consequences as a result of regularly banning players for breaching the code of conduct.

As communities of play with shared values, guilds are able to better control who gains access to their communities and regulate acceptable behaviour. As such, guilds are better positioned to shape the gaming experience of players and provide a more equitable gaming environment if they so choose. In the case of The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint, the values that hold these particular communities of play together are part of the protections offered
by citizenship in the community. Equity is fundamental to the maintenance and reproduction of these guilds. The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint on Proudmoore have taken on the task of creating and moderating a community in a way that Blizzard Entertainment will not, or perhaps given the current cultural climate in World of Warcraft, cannot accomplish.

How does Proudmoore Fit In?

Proudmoore as a server can itself be considered an imagined community, for many of the same reasons that there can be an imagined World of Warcraft community. The only real difference is that the borders are smaller and its members identify with the server rather than the game. This is not to say that players necessarily see themselves as part of one community or the other, but as a part of both; each being a distinct community. As has been discussed, Proudmoore has developed a reputation and arguably an identity as a welcoming, diverse and LGBTQ friendly server. This is exemplified by a player writing about their experience of Proudmoore in response to a forum post about bigotry in World of Warcraft culture, “Seriously, if anyone is looking for an accepting community that doesn’t harass each other not just for sexual orientation, or ANY reason whatsoever, come to Proudmoore, it’s the best server I’ve ever been on” (Sxv, General Discussion, April 7th 2014, Msg. 320). While these guilds may not be what initially instigated Proudmoore’s reputation, they certainly work to maintain and reproduce it. As the two largest LGBTQ friendly guilds in World of Warcraft, the presence of The Stonewall Family, The Spreading Taint, and their annual Proudmoore Pride event have attracted many other LGBTQ friendly guilds to the server. The presence of these players with the support of their guild communities presents opportunities for alternative discourses to be circulated throughout the server. The mitigation of precarity for The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint members, and the socially cohesive nature of these guild communities likely creates a feeling of safety for
players who want to confront or challenge those players who engage in homophobic speech. Regardless of whether the player is a citizen of one of these guilds, they know that there are many other players who are likely to offer support in an instance of conflict, rather than verbally attack them, as would typically be the case on another server.

Conclusion
Although it is part of Blizzard Entertainment’s official discourse to maintain a fair gaming environment for all players, the company has demonstrated through its actions that equity is not a priority in their imagined World of Warcraft community. The company’s desire for economic gain trumps the other values outlined in their official discourse, leaving marginalized players to fend for themselves. As communities of play, The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint have offered their members an alternative option to the mainstream community experience. They have done so in part by using citizenship as a means of conferring protections on their members. These protections are mainly the same as those supposedly afforded by Blizzard Entertainment. However, where Blizzard Entertainment often fails to enforce their rules and live up to their promise of fairness, the leadership of these communities of play do not. Further, it seems to be the case on Proudmoore that heteronormative ignorance and homophobia are not tolerated by players in public server chat channels any more than they are within the Proudmoore guilds. Given this link between communities of play and chat channels, an exploration of how and why particular kinds of speech should be moderated or policed in-game seems prudent. The following chapter includes a discussion of free speech, hate speech and how regulating the use of pejorative language (and enforcing those regulations) can be used to create a more equitable gaming environment.
Chapter Four: Free Speech, Hate Speech and Language Moderation

Introduction

Catherine MacKinnon (1996) says that “speech, hence the lines within which much of life can be lived, belongs to those who own it” (78). In the context of this quote, she is mainly referring to the power of corporations and their ability to transmit their discourse as truth. In the context of World of Warcraft, speech (including text) is what gives life to players’ avatars and Blizzard Entertainment is literally the owner of the means through which speech can occur. Blizzard Entertainment recognizes the importance of speech saying that, “Communicating in-game with other Users and Blizzard representatives, whether by text, voice or any other method, is an integral part of the Game and the Service” (World of Warcraft Terms of Use Agreement 2012). While Blizzard Entertainment certainly has a part in circulating versions of truth, there is still, as Fiske (1994) would say, a “struggle over whose discourse should be put into, [which] is part of the politics of everyday life” (7). By using heteronormative and homophobic language and demanding its protection under the guise of free speech, certain players are actively reinforcing the marginalization of LGBTQ players in World of Warcraft. As MacKinnon (1996) explains, “the less speech you have, the more the speech of those who have it keeps you unequal; the more the speech of the dominant is protected, the more dominant they become and the less the subordinated are heard from” (1996:73). By trivializing the power of homophobic language, and/or challenges to its use, players are ensuring the dominance of heteronormative discourse. In other words, they are telling their truth and consequently silencing the truths of others. Fiske (1994) tells us that, “discourse continues its work silently in our heads as we make our own sense of our everyday lives” pointing to the significance of the language players both witness and use in-game, as well as how it is used (6). Players in The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint
recognize this and have created player-moderated social spaces that challenge the idea that hate speech is ‘only words’ and that players disturbed by them should assume responsibility for coping with the consequences of the harmful speech acts of others.

So far in this paper, the use of pejorative language to denigrate groups based on sexuality has been discussed in terms of contributing to the precarity of the LGBTQ community in World of Warcraft and also as an important factor in determining inclusion and exclusion in particular communities of play. In this chapter, I argue that regulating and moderating pejorative language are key aspects of creating and maintaining an equitable gaming environment. I begin with a discussion about how World of Warcraft players think about and use the concepts of free speech and hate speech. While many players acknowledge that Blizzard Entertainment has control over the channels of communication in-game, interpretations of what can and should be said through those channels seems to be up for some debate. Players’ understandings and beliefs about free speech and hate speech underpin their attitudes about how language should be or should not be regulated within the game.

Using a thread titled “Hate Speech Solution” from the World of Warcraft forums and drawing on the work of MacKinnon (1996) and Waldron (2012) to demonstrate the harms that result from hate speech, I examine four strategies players use to justify or make light of hate speech. First, I found that many players make a distinction between ‘real’ hate speech and ‘virtual’ hate speech. It is as if words transmitted through the internet have less meaning than those spoken in person. Second, some players argue that hate speech is simply words and that there must be a physical threat before harm can be done. Third, others believe that there is a distinction between individually targeted harassment and the use of general hate. These players believe that people can only be harmed if they are targeted directly by a person or group and
harassed on a personal level. Fourth, some players conflate being politically incorrect and the use of hate speech and therefore reduce the harms of communication to a victim merely ‘being offended’.

A subsequent examination of Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft* Terms of Use Agreement and their ‘In-game and Forum Violations’ support forum reveals that the discourse of Blizzard Entertainment regarding the use of particular types of language is inconsistent and conflicting. In one document the company condemns the use of a variety of language that would be considered hate speech. In another document, the company essentially says that hate speech really only matters if someone gets upset enough to complain about it and even then, only in certain contexts. Finally, using The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint’s respective guild charters, I examine the practices the two guilds employ in regulating and moderating pejorative language.

**Free Speech and its Limitations**

Free speech is referred to frequently by *World of Warcraft* players in conversations about in-game bigotry and harassment. Players’ interpretations of what free speech is and their perceived right to it are very important in understanding discursive power in *World of Warcraft* culture. Many *World of Warcraft* players seem to believe that absolutely anything they say is protected under an assumed right to unlimited free speech. This belief is typically articulated through comments along the same lines as this one made by a player going by the name Smashesface, “I value free speech over your hurt feelings” (Smashesface, General Discussion, September 19th, 2012, Msg. 24). In their discussion of broader video game culture, Jenson and De Castell (2013) argue that, “What is continuously misapprehended about the right to ‘free speech’ is that it is and always has been subject to limitations. It is not within one’s right to verbally harm
someone, for example, through slander or libel or hate speech” (77). Technically, the legal definitions of free speech are moot in the context of World of Warcraft as Blizzard Entertainment has legal control of what can be said in-game via their user agreements. However, free speech is still a useful concept since many players cling to it like a shield when confronted by accusations of hate, bigotry, or harassment.

As discussed briefly in chapter two, players tend to hold the targets of hate speech responsible for dealing with the fallout, rather than dealing with the hate speech itself. Even while they claim to abhor it, the most vile, toxic, and hateful language is defended by players because they believe that free speech trumps all other concerns. MacKinnon (1996) gives a convincing explanation of why this may be the case,

For constitutional purposes, there is no such thing as a false idea, there are only more or less “offensive” ones, to remedy which, love of liberty recommends averting the eyes or growing a thicker skin. Americans are taught this view by about the fourth grade…to the point that those who embrace it think it is their own personal faith, their own original view, and trot it out like something learned from their own personal lives every time a problem is denominated one of “speech,” whether it really fits or not…This approach is adhered to with a fundamentalist zeal even when it serves to protect lies, silence dissent, destroy careers, intrude on associations, and retard change (76-77).

The notion that World of Warcraft players can say whatever they want, to whoever they want, whenever they want is false, and yet it is still widely believed to be true. That is not to say that some players do not recognize that there are limitations to what can be said in-game. Solaru replied to Smashesface’s comment saying, “Free speech does not mean what you think it means.
Blizz can quell your speech if they want with almost 100% impunity. L2USConstitution”
(Solaru, General Discussion, September 19th 2012, Msg. 30). Blizzard Entertainment has
explicitly outlined that there are several topics players are not ‘free’ to talk about in-game or
through the forums in their Terms of Use and Code of Conduct. For example, players may not
“(vi) harass, threaten, stalk, embarrass or cause distress, unwanted attention or discomfort to any
user of the Game” (World of Warcraft Terms of Use Agreement 2012). As mentioned in chapter
two, the Battle.net Code of Conduct forbids players to “Insultingly refer to any aspect of sexual
orientation pertaining to themselves or other players” (2015). There are also many examples of
forum posts that come up as results of a search, yet have been made unavailable to read by forum
moderators because of content that violates the Terms of Use Agreement or the Code of
Conduct. At the same time, in-game chat is rife with speech that violates these same policies.

Hate Speech and Harms of Communication in World of Warcraft

Although the exact wording varies, most legal definitions of hate speech are along the
lines of discrimination, hatred, or violence against a group of people based on a social category
such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc. MacKinnon (1996) describes a
consequence of hate speech as harms of communication which she says are “[w]hat the words
particularly [do] through the meaning they [convey]” (49). In other words, harms of
communication are the tacit messages expressed by hate speech. Similarly, Waldron (2012)
argues that hate speech works to convey two strong messages; one to the people it targets and
another to people who are not targeted. To its targets, hate speech says:

“Don’t be fooled into thinking you are welcome here. The society
around you may seem hospitable and nondiscriminatory, but the truth

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18 L2USConstitution translates to ‘learn to US Constitution’. Solaru is implying that Smashesface is ignorant of the
details of the US Constitution as it pertains to free speech.
is that you are not wanted, and you and your families will be shunned, excluded, beaten, and driven out, whenever we can get away with it. We may have to keep a low profile right now. But don’t get too comfortable. Re-member what has happened to you and your kind in the past. Be afraid” (Waldron 2012:2).

Simultaneously, the same hate speech is saying to others:

“We know some of you agree that these people are not wanted here. We know that some of you feel that they are dirty (or dangerous or criminal or terrorist). Know now that you are not alone. Whatever the government says, there are enough of us around to make sure these people are not welcome. There are enough of us around to draw attention to what these people are really like. Talk to your neighbors, talk to your customers. And above all, don’t let any more of them in” (Waldron 2012:2-3).

These messages are the consequence of using hate speech whether they are intended or not. Someone who uses hate speech in-game because they believe they are being funny (someone who does not think they will be taken seriously) is still conveying these messages to other players who are around to witness the hate speech.

The use of language meeting the criteria of hate speech in World of Warcraft is something that Blizzard Entertainment claims is not allowed in their game and yet it is seen in-game frequently. Players recognize this and it has spurred several discussions via the World of Warcraft forums. As with the meaning of free speech, World of Warcraft players also debate the meaning of hate speech. A player named Syrin began the forum thread titled “Hate Speech Solution” writing that, “It’s no secret that hate speech is slung around WoW like parade candy. Thing is, few people have suggested a solution” Syrin then goes on to suggest that, “If a racial/ethnic/sexual slur/epithet is used by a player in chat they are immediately banned for 3 days…Just tweak the language filter code so if a players says a slur in chat they get banned for 3
days” (Syrin, General Discussion, September 19th, 2012, Msg. 1). This post sparked a conversation including over 200 hundred posts of players debating what hate speech is, what it is not, and how it should be handled.

Several interesting themes emerged from the “Hate Speech Solution” thread. First, there was a common distinction made between ‘real’ hate and virtual hate. A player going by the name Maralua says, “hate speech [in World of Warcraft] should be overlooked because it doesn’t matter. If you’re upset by something on the internet, leave the internet. Trying to police the chat channels is like herding cats that don’t like you and without offering them food” (Maralua, General Discussion, September 19th, 2012, Msg. 5). This player and those who made similar comments are reinforcing the message conveyed to players targeted by hate speech that they do not belong in the World of Warcraft community. The comments make it clear that ‘the internet’ (in this case, the World of Warcraft community) is a space where hate speech is acceptable, but implies that it is not acceptable in offline behaviour. Essentially, players supporting this viewpoint seem to be trying to protect ‘their’ online space from ‘others’ who may challenge their privileged position on the internet. It should also be noted that while the cat metaphor is amusing to think about, the idea that hate speech ‘doesn’t matter’ certainly is not. Using humor to explain such a serious topic in this way works to trivialize the frequent use of hate speech and the harms it produces in World of Warcraft.

Interestingly, Blizzard Entertainment also promotes the idea that there is a split between the internet and the ‘real-world’. Community Manager Rygarius locked the ‘Hate Speech Solution’ thread only six hours after it was created stating, “The thread has been locked for going off-topic into discussions beyond the intended scope of the forums. Debate about real-world politics is not an appropriate topic for discussion” (Rygarius, General Discussion, September 19th
Claiming that this conversation has no place in official *World of Warcraft* forums because it is about ‘real-life politics’ implies that ‘real-life politics’ are not part of the everyday *World of Warcraft* play experience of players. If this brief discussion thread has demonstrated anything, it is that this claim could not be further from the truth. The *World of Warcraft* forums are provided as a place for players to discuss issues *about* the game *outside* of the game. This specific discussion thread was a venue for players to express their concerns regarding the use of particular kinds of language in *World of Warcraft*. The thread had potential to prompt productive dialogue and exchange that would not have been easily facilitated through an in-game conversation, however, the Community Manager’s intervention prevented that from happening. Rather than acknowledging the problem of hate speech being used commonly in their game and encouraging players to engage in socially productive dialogue with each other, Blizzard Entertainment literally silences any discussion that may result in controversy or conflict by claiming that it does not belong in the game or by extension, the forums.

The distinction between the ‘real’ and the virtual was also articulated as (serious) physical threats versus (non-serious) verbal threats. In response to Syrin’s initial post about hate speech, a player going by the name of Blackgoddess says, “And as long as they are not physically threatening you so what” (Blackgoddess, General Discussion, September 19th, 2012, Msg. 8). Similarly, another player going by the name of Kerrath says, “If your feelings are being hurt, I really don’t care. The threat has to be real. And if the threat is real, you can call the police” (Kerrath, General Discussion, September 19th 2012, Msg. 211). The logic behind these comments is that if you cannot be physically touched through the internet, you cannot be harmed; feelings are not real. This view serves to legitimize hate speech while completely
rejecting any recognition or validation of the harms of communication experienced by players targeted by it.

Second, many players considered hate speech to be ‘only words’; that they were not actually causing any harm. Some took it a step further and blamed people who were harmed by hate speech for not ignoring it or having thick enough skin. This is similar to the first view, however, for these players there was no distinction between online and offline words; in either setting, words do no harm and it is up to the victim to ignore them. A saying children are often taught in elementary school was included in several comments like this one, “I am oft reminded of saying I knew as a kid “Sticks and stones may break my bones But name will never hurt me” (Brutaria, General Discussion, September 19th 2012, Msg. 185). Trivializing hate speech as something that can be overcome by a simple children’s rhyme belittles the exclusion and suffering that hate speech can inflict on players. Viewing hate speech as humour has a similarly trivializing effect. Some players argued that what used to be considered hate speech is now used as a means of creating humour instead, “slang has evolved so much since its inception that it isn’t necessarily used in hateful ways anymore…Obviously there are examples, but most of the time its just jokes which don’t hurt anyone” (Redfang, General discussion, September 19th, 2012, Msg. 92). These players do not consider the ramifications of these ‘jokes’ in creating and normalizing an atmosphere that is hostile to entire groups of people.

Third, there was a distinction made between individual targets of harassment and generalized hate speech. If a specific player is being threatened or harassed on a personal level, players tended to agree that it was completely unacceptable behaviour. As an example, if a player was prevented from joining a group because their voice ‘sounds gay’ and the group leader tells them they do not want ‘fags’ in the group, that would be unacceptable. In contrast, if hate
speech is being used in more general terms, then it is more likely to be interpreted as humorous rather than hateful. An example of this is the constant use of “gay” as a negative descriptor of an event or object. A player going by the name of Redfang exemplifies this viewpoint, saying that hate speech is a problem “Only to people that let it effect them or to people who are being maliciously targeted. I feel for the latter, but the first just need more world experience” (Redfang, General Discussion, September 19th 2012, Msg. 48). One possible explanation for this viewpoint could again be based in the notion that harms of communication are not actually harmful. Individual harassment is a personal attack where a particular player is singled out making the harassment difficult for that individual to ignore. If a player does not acknowledge the tacit messages behind hate speech, they would have no reason to see its general use as threatening to anyone and would likely think the language easy to ignore.

Finally, a number of players conflated hate speech and harms of communication with political incorrectness and being offended. Waldron (2012) makes a distinction between taking offense and having one’s dignity violated. Dignity he says, is “a person’s basic entitlement to be regarded as a member of society in good standing, as someone whose membership of a minority group does not disqualify him or her from ordinary social interaction” (Waldron 2012: 105). The harms of communication experienced via hate speech threaten targeted players’ dignity. To offend someone, on the other hand, is simply to hurt their feelings. While hurt feelings are something people obviously wish to avoid, they are not the same as having one’s dignity violated. A comment posted by a player going by the name of Harzlok illustrates this conflation when he says about hate speech that, “words are only offensive because people LET THEMSELVES BE OFFENDED. Stop crying about them and suddenly words lose their power” (Harzlok, General Discussion, September 19th 2012, Msg. 125). The focus here is on the feelings
of players targeted by hate speech rather than the effect of hate speech in segregating and excluding groups of people from full participation in the community.

Considering the wording of Blizzard Entertainment’s policies and regulations, it is reasonable to assume Waldron’s notion of dignity is something the company desires for all players to possess, yet at the same time, the company uses conflicting language that also conflates harms of communication and taking offense. For example, the forum code of conduct is the document that lists all of the language players may not use to speak to each other, most of which is easily defined as hate speech. At the bottom of the document written in simpler and more personal language it says as a sort of summary for players, “While certain language and images may not be offensive to you, consider the fact that that same language and images may have a completely different effect on someone else. We’ve done everything we can to make this a great environment – now it’s up to you!” (Battle.net Code of Conduct 2015). This short message in conjunction with the frequency with which hate speech is used in the forums and particularly in-game, speaks to the fact that Blizzard Entertainment may not recognize the power of harms of communication in fracturing their World of Warcraft community and marginalizing some of its members. It could also be however, that there are limitations in how they are able to moderate language to protect players’ dignity.

Moderating Language in World of Warcraft

The language Blizzard Entertainment finds unacceptable has already been discussed previously, as have the tools the company offers players for dealing with bad behaviour (ignoring and reporting). It is important to also consider the limitations of Blizzard Entertainment’s speech policies, as well as limitations to their ability to moderate the language used in World of Warcraft culture. Blizzard Entertainment explains that “Because of the
voluntary nature of guild participation, we take a more lenient stance in guild channels. Only the most severe violations (i.e. Racial/Ethnic/National, Extreme Sexual/Violence, Real-life Threats) will be considered” (In-Game and Forum Violations 2015). By including this caveat in their policies Blizzard Entertainment is essentially saying that all of the language they claim players should not use is actually acceptable. The argument that being a member of a guild is voluntary points to the fact that technically, participation in any chat is voluntary. Players have the option to remove themselves from server wide chat channels, they can ignore individual players, and they have the option of not playing the game; however, all of those options degrade (or end) the play experience in some way. Suggesting that players should simply remove themselves from a given community when hate speech occurs is counterproductive if the goal is to create a fun, fair and safe gaming environment for everyone.

There are also several limitations in how and when Blizzard Entertainment is able to moderate language between players. Players commonly use some kind of VoIP software that is independent of World of Warcraft to facilitate voice communication while playing. Offering a VoIP server is practically a universal requirement of maintaining a guild and players also use them frequently to coordinate pick-up groups with strangers. Blizzard Entertainment has absolutely no power to moderate what is said in voice chat that is not facilitated through the World of Warcraft game itself. The chatter that occurs over VoIP between guildmates is typically similar to what would be expected of a group of people watching a hockey game or having drinks at a pub creating an atmosphere of familiarity and community (Nardi 2010; Sundén and Svenningson 2012). If a player uses hate speech in this setting, other players have little recourse outside of their guild policies (if there are any) or appealing to the player who controls the VoIP server to remove them.
The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint recognize that Blizzard Entertainment has limitations in their ability to moderate language in-game and through VoIP. They also acknowledge the importance that moderating language has in creating and sustaining an equitable gaming environment for their players and have made guild policies designed to take on this task themselves. The Spreading Taint – Rough Trade Gaming Community charter includes the statement that, “As a member of the RTGC, you do not have an unlimited right to free speech” (Rough Trade Gaming Community Charter 2015). Almost identically, The Stonewall Family charter indicates that, “As a member of The Stonewall Family, you do not have a right to unlimited free speech when using our guild resources” (The Stonewall Family Charter 2015).

Both guilds go on to provide examples of what this means. For The Spreading Taint it means no, “Negative comments/jokes based on sexual orientation, gender, race, religion, political persuasion, age, any body-type/body part of either gender, or any form of bigotry” (Rough Trade Gaming Community Charter 2015). The Stonewall Family provides an almost identical description of how free speech is limited, but they add that “This includes use of anyone's sexual orientation in a negative or demeaning way -- use of the term "gay" as a pejorative, demeaning comments about body parts, or any terms like "breeder" which marginalize a segment of our membership -- is specifically prohibited” (The Stonewall Family Charter 2015). These regulations are similar to those set by Blizzard Entertainment in the World of Warcraft Terms of Use Agreement, but are more detailed. These charters set the norm for what is considered unacceptable use of language in these guilds and create an expectation that members will not be confronted with it when they play.

Importantly, The Stonewall Family also makes specific mention of the word “rape” and the insensitive way it has been appropriated by World of Warcraft culture. Their charter states,
“The Stonewall Family recognizes that the term "rape" has a very charged impact on victims of sexual assault or abuse, and as a result -- does not allow its use in our guild chat in a casual manner to discuss PvP kills, or jokingly toward any other player. Our guild feels that the pain to former victims outweighs any benefit achieved by using this term casually when other words that are less hurtful could be substituted.” (Stonewall Family Charter)

The word “rape” is commonly used among World of Warcraft players. It is typically employed to describe victory or defeat of some kind; the player or non-player character that wins does the raping while the player or non-player character who loses is the one who is raped. In an interview with Salter and Blodgett (2012) regarding a popular gaming comic site that had released a comic including a rape joke, a player going by the name of Sydera spoke of their experience of this type of language in World of Warcraft,

“I’m a former WoW player, and when I decided to quit, the rape jokes that my guild continually employed in and out of raids, on vent, and on chat, weighed heavily on my decision…it is my thought that the reason this cartoon thought a rape joke would be funny is the pervasive use of ‘rape’ among WoW players to mean something other than rape” (Sydera, 2010)” (405-406).

This is an example of how particular kinds of language can be used to create an oppressive atmosphere or to cause certain players to feel excluded. The Stonewall Family acknowledges that there is no practical use for the word to be bandied about as it so often is in World of Warcraft and so they have regulated it and have guild officers who moderate the guild’s lines of communication. This kind of regulation and moderation makes the World of Warcraft experience more positive and inclusive for some players without detracting from the fun, fair and safe game environment Blizzard Entertainment suggests all players should be privy to.
Conclusion

The language that is used between players in World of Warcraft plays an integral role in shaping a player’s experience of the game. While Blizzard Entertainment has regulated the use of pejorative language to a certain extent, their official documents contain conflicting information and downplay the importance of the rules. Further, their enforcement of the regulations and moderation of in-game chat channels is mediocre at best. Once again, Proudmoore offers an alternative World of Warcraft experience for players who do not wish to be bombarded with hateful language when they play the game. Many members of The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint have very likely been on the receiving end of hate speech and the harms of communication. Having a space where hate speech is strictly moderated (and given the context of these two guilds, rather unlikely to occur at all) players are more likely to feel they can fully participate in the game and community without experiencing the common barrage of hate speech and homophobic language.
Chapter Five: Concluding Thoughts

Brief Summary

Broadly, the goal of this paper was to gain some insight into how marginalized players, and LGBTQ players in particular, have shaped their own cultural experience of World of Warcraft. It was also my hope to contribute to our understanding of productive resistance and positive social change in video game culture, even if only in a small way. This investigation has illustrated how players on the Proudmoore server have encouraged an equitable gaming environment and fostered a meaningful, inclusive community in World of Warcraft by providing players protections from bigotry and a space where marginalized players can become part of the centre.

Drawing on Butler’s theory of precarity, it was argued that LGBTQ players have been positioned as precarious subjects within World of Warcraft culture, leaving them vulnerable and exposed to aggression, harassment, and hate with little to no protection from Blizzard Entertainment. This precarity is (re)produced in three distinct ways. First, via Blizzard Entertainment’s inadequate protections for LGBTQ and other marginalized players. This is particularly alarming given the company’s claim that the game offers a fun, fair and safe gaming environment for all players. Second, this precarity is seen through heteronormative understandings of sexuality and the demand that queer sexuality be erased from existence within the game and World of Warcraft culture. Third, a state of precarity is produced through non-marginalized players’ common refusal to recognize the subordination and harassment that LGBTQ players face as a social problem, or even as anything more than a joke. On the Proudmoore server, two LGBTQ-friendly guilds, The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint, have challenged this precarity by claiming space to represent marginalized players who
are often relegated to the background, and by creating a community where queer discourses can be circulated without fear of persecution or oppression.

Anderson’s (2006) imagined communities and Peace’s (2009) Communities of Play were used as frameworks to examine the notion of community in *World of Warcraft*. As communities of play, it was argued that guilds are uniquely positioned to provide a safe and inclusive space for *all* players. In so doing, players on Proudmoore have created a community that is alternative to that of the mainstream community and culture delivered by Blizzard Entertainment. The members of The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint are united via shared identities grounded in difference, as well as the shared values of mutual respect and loyalty to one another. Using social citizenship as a tool to achieve equity, these two guilds have created social policies that offer their members protections from bigotry in ways that Blizzard Entertainment is not willing or possibly able to do.

Finally, language plays a pivotal role in determining players’ experience within *World of Warcraft* culture. Understandings of free speech and hate speech influence players’ perspectives of how and if pejorative language should be moderated in the game and the official forums. It is unreasonable to suggest that companies like Blizzard Entertainment should be responsible for explaining the philosophy behind hate speech and the harms of communication. As such, establishing rules and regulations that inhibit or at least reduce the use of pejorative language, and subsequently enforcing these rules and regulations, are necessary steps in creating equity in an online video game community. As has been demonstrated, some players do not see a reason to control hate speech or pejorative language, so unless it is imposed on them, others will continue to be victimized. By strictly moderating hate speech and other language they consider harmful, The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint offer their players protections from continual
exposure to harms of communication and marginalization, encouraging an environment where all players can fully participate in the game.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Given the overt hostility LGBTQ players commonly encounter in the *World of Warcraft* community, perhaps it should be unsurprising that an alternative community like the one on Proudmoore coalesced. At the same time, I find it remarkable how much care, time, effort, and labour is poured into maintaining guilds like The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint - and by extension the greater Proudmoore community. As an officer in my own small *World of Warcraft* guild, I know that demands and pressures on time and attention can often be a challenge - especially for something that is meant to be a leisure activity. Even with only 20 to 25 players, everything from coordinating weekly activities to managing conflicting personalities within the guild can be taxing. For guilds like The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint who have hundreds of players, these seemingly simple tasks must be extraordinarily challenging. As if that was not enough, the leadership of these guilds take on the responsibility of representing LGBTQ players and struggling for recognition and equity within the game and broader culture. At this point, it seems like more of a full-time job than a game for these players. Organizing and facilitating events like the Proudmoore Pride Parade would be an enormous undertaking. It makes me curious about the groups of people who run these guilds. What motivates them to do this work? I also wonder what would happen if Blizzard Entertainment became actively and openly involved with events like Proudmoore Pride. It would certainly send a clear message that the company supports all players.
This research has made it abundantly clear that guilds can play a pivotal role in nurturing an equitable gaming atmosphere. This is perhaps something that Blizzard Entertainment could use to their advantage. It is conceivable that there could be some kind of in-game reward system implemented to encourage players to follow the established policies. Conversely, penalties could be applied to guilds whose members breach policies regularly. Placing responsibility at the community level rather than solely at the individual level might encourage players to think twice before violating policy. Not only would they be risking punitive action from Blizzard Entertainment, but also disapproval from their peers. It could also leave players who are particularly vocal with their hatred in a situation where few others want to play with them.

**Future Research**

The expanding popularity and accessibility of video games, as well as the increasing diversity of video game players suggests that games studies as an area of academic study has really only begun to scratch the surface of research possibilities. Given the prominent cultural climate of hostility towards difference in video game culture, it is important that scholars continue to explore video games at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and age. It is also important that future studies not only work to document and explain existing conditions of misogyny, homophobia, racism and other ways of being marginalized in video game culture, but also to look for ways of creating change and improving conditions for all players. As mentioned at the beginning of this project, there is a very large gap in games studies literature exploring resistance and the ways players fight back against subordination and exclusion.

As I alluded to briefly above, it is likely that the players in leadership roles in guilds like The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint have a wealth of information about organizing communities and resisting marginalization. If this particular line of research were to continue,
speaking with these players would be a good place to start. It would also be interesting to seek out alternative communities on other servers (and other games) to see if their experiences and practices are similar to those of the Proudmoore guilds. Typically because of problems involving access, little work has been done to investigate the practices and beliefs of game developers and marketers who work for companies like Blizzard Entertainment. This information could provide valuable insight into if and how these practices and beliefs influence players’ attitudes. Projects like these would be a step toward answering Jenson and De Castell’s (2013) call for scholars to move beyond “being content to amass descriptions of how dreadful things are and finding or devising explanations of existing states of affairs” and to begin focusing more concertedly on how to achieve an equitable and inclusive video game culture for all (80).
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